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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.000049a0>

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'Separate Realities'

**An investigation into the social behaviour
of a group of adults with severe learning
difficulties and a discussion of the factors
which appear to motivate this behaviour.**

By

**Bette Liddell
M9525285**

**Submitted to the Open University in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree**

of

Doctor of Education (EdD)

September 2001

ABSTRACT

This report explores a range of underlying factors which appear to motivate the social behaviour of adults with severe learning difficulties. While there is ample evidence to suggest that these adults often behave in ways viewed as unacceptable by the wider population, a skills deficit approach to the issue is frequently adopted. This dissertation argues that this view is both over-simplistic and inappropriately judgmental and that the behaviours demonstrated often serve an important purpose in the lives of the individuals concerned.

This research is located within a number of theoretical perspectives related to inclusion and the politicisation of disability, the development of personal and social identity and the acquisition of emotional intelligence.

The study is focused on a group of adults with severe learning difficulties who attend a further education college in Northern Ireland. Data were collected by observation and interviews with students, college staff, carers, volunteers and other professionals.

A number of salient themes have emerged. The perceptions of the student group are at great variance with those of carers and professionals, which suggests major communication barriers and the need for on-going reality checks for the students themselves and for those working with them. In addition, there is little awareness among the non-disabled participants of the extent to which the students' behaviours are a response to their own expectations and actions. Interestingly, too, those students viewed as demonstrating the most 'undesirable' behaviours are the students who most want to be included in mainstream life.

Finally, where a need for skills development work is identified, it is argued that this should take account of recent developments in emotional intelligence and attribution theories. A social skills model, involving learned acceptance of set rules, is not seen as acceptable. In addition, teaching staff are encouraged to view the gaining of student perceptions as an integral, planned part of their own teaching. Challenging professional attitudes and approaches to the delivery of programmes is essential for the development of good practice within educational institutions.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to the many people who gave so freely of their time and expertise to help in the completion of this report. In particular I would like to thank the students who made the work, not only interesting, but also an immensely enjoyable experience.

My thanks also go to my family who have provided ongoing support and encouragement over such a lengthy period.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the help and advice of my tutor whose mastery of the English language has been both a challenge and an inspiration in recent years.

CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION

Rationale

In a major report, 'Inclusive Learning', Professor Tomlinson (1996) has stressed the need to increase opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in Further Education and to improve the quality of the service they receive. He argues that there is a strong economic case for more and better provision for adults with severe learning difficulties and highlights the correlation between unemployment and the level of qualifications for those with disabilities.

At the same time, Tomlinson and Colqhoun's (1995) paper examines the impact of the national vocational qualifications (N.V.Q.) framework on young people seen as having special educational needs and challenges the rhetoric of employability underpinning the development of vocational courses. The authors express concern that the funding mechanisms for N.V.Q. programmes may result in discrimination against students with learning difficulties in Further Education and lead to a narrow, 'mechanical' curriculum aimed at 'payment by result'. Those students requiring more time and/or more assistance may not be economically attractive to the colleges and their admission to vocational courses could be threatened.

The introduction of competence based training and workplace assessment has also meant that, for many, the attitudes of others in the workplace may determine whether or not placement is possible (Ford, 1996). It would seem, therefore, that some understanding of the factors influencing acceptance and tolerance is needed to underpin the work done in terms of preparing students with disabilities for the adult world.

A fairly recent development in the area of vocational training has been the incorporation of core/key skills units into N.V.Q. programmes. This

represents a recognition that teaching and assessment of interpersonal and communication skills are essential for a wide range of potential employees and also an acknowledgement that many school leavers do have training needs in these areas. Although the focus of this report is on the experiences of adults with severe learning difficulties, I hope that it will have some relevance for all staff involved in the delivery of personal and social development programmes.

It is not only students on vocational and academic programmes who require core or key skills training. Current trends towards care in the community have resulted in many people with learning disabilities being 'placed' back in their communities but often ill equipped to meet the demands of everyday social functioning. Having spent most of their lives in segregated settings such as special schools, hospitals, training centres and day care units, it is unrealistic to expect that, left to their own devices, these adults will develop the skills necessary to interact successfully in the wider world.

As Learning Support Co-ordinator at East Down Institute of Further and Higher Education, I have been involved for many years in the organisation and delivery of personal/ social development courses for adults who have severe learning difficulties. Many of the students have achieved considerable success in terms of courses passed and new skills gained. However, teaching teams have consistently expressed their concern in relation to the frequent breakdown of work placements. This has been explained, not in terms of the students' inability to acquire appropriate vocational skills, but in terms of aspects of their personalities which were described as annoying or offensive by other staff or the public with whom they came in contact.

Attempts to include these adults in other mainstream courses have similarly met with limited success. Complaints from staff and other students have again related to excessive levels of passivity, attention seeking behaviours, repetitive, ego-centred speech and unacceptable personal habits. If we are to improve the quality of our provision and help make inclusion a reality for those students who want it, there is a need for us to attempt to understand

more in relation to the reasons why such behaviours are so prevalent among this particular group. What function, if any, do they serve and what meanings do the individuals concerned attribute to them?

Terminology

The language used to refer to the people with whom this study is concerned is problematic. Within my own college our practice has been to use the term 'learning difficulty' as defined in section 4 (6) Further and Higher Education Act 1992 as follows:

(6) Subject to subsection (7) below, for the purposes of this section a person has a 'learning difficulty' if -

- (a) he(sic) has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of persons of his age, or*
- (b) he(sic) has a disability which either prevents or hinders him from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided by institutions within the further education sector for persons of his age.*

Adoption of this type of definition reflects a move away from acceptance of the system of disability categories which was in operation prior to the Education Act, 1981. The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) argued that children often had to cope with more than one disability, that the category labels were stigmatising and that children with the same disability did not necessarily require the same type of provision. Moreover, the report stressed the role played by the use of categories in terms of differentiating between the 'handicapped' and the 'non-handicapped'.

Currently, legal categorisation no longer exists and the focus, theoretically, at least, is now on the child as an individual. The Department of Education and Science (1983) also recognises the need to assess learning needs in the

context in which the learning is to take place. Consideration of this interaction with the environment is central to our understanding of the support requirements of individual learners.

Within the Further Education sector, the notion of **inclusive learning**, as proposed in the Tomlinson Report (1996), is also linked with the need to redesign processes of assessment, learning and organisation to meet individual needs. The report stresses that inclusive learning is not synonymous with integration. It involves identifying the best possible learning environment which may, or may not, be in an integrated setting. Most importantly, it recognises the need for teachers to differentiate their approaches in order to match the learning styles of individual students. This reflects an awareness of the way in which many of the challenges associated with disability are socially constructed and are located in the environment rather than within the individuals themselves.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, states that a person has a **disability** if-

‘s/he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on her/his ability to carry out normal day to day activities.’

The term *‘mental impairment’*, as used in this piece of legislation, is intended to cover a wide range of impairments relating to mental functioning and includes learning difficulties.

Clearly, there will be problems around any attempt to define categorically what constitutes a substantial adverse effect or indeed to list conclusively those activities deemed ‘normal, day-to-day’. The definitions used in education, and cited above, are similarly problematic. What assumptions are we to make, for example, about ‘facilities of a kind generally provided’? The size of a college, its financial situation, physical location and numerous other factors will dictate the quantity and type of resources available. This varies widely across the country and it would, I suspect, be very difficult to

identify any sort of norm.

The adults involved in this study all require a significant amount of help and support to carry out their daily lives and all have been labelled ‘mentally handicapped’ or, in fewer cases, ‘learning disabled’. I am aware that difficulties and challenges arise not solely in relation to academic functioning but as a complex web of past experiences and ongoing personal histories. While, for the purposes of this report, I intend to use the term ‘learning difficulty’, this is not to deny or minimise the existence of other equally significant problems.

The task of defining ‘**social competence**’ has been approached in two ways. First, it has been defined solely in terms of social skills (Sarason, 1981), including such dimensions as problem solving behaviour, perspective taking and person perception. Secondly, it has been defined in terms of outcomes i.e. as the ability to be effective in the realisation of social goals (Foster and Ritchie, 1979; Anderson and Messick, 1974). These social outcomes include having friends, being popular or liked and engaging in effective social interaction with peers.

The two approaches are, I think, complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, and simply represent variations in focus and approach. I prefer the second model in that it considers what is productive for the individual rather than imposing some professional definition of what constitutes essential skills. A skills approach, in my view, does not sufficiently recognise the social and environmental factors which come into play. What could be socially productive in one situation may not be so in another. Similarly, what might constitute an important social skill in one time and place might be totally redundant in another. In order to consider an individual’s capacity to be effective socially, it is necessary to consider also the values, attitudes and goals of those with whom s/he is interacting. The skill level of the individual is but one aspect of the overall process.

While an outcomes approach is preferable, there remains the problem of defining those outcomes which suggest success. Again, this must be

considered on an individual basis and we must beware of making generalisations that are not sustainable. Having control over their own environment is a central issue for many of the students with whom I work but we cannot assume that having friends and being popular are necessary aspects of this control. Nor can we assume that social popularity is a chosen goal for all of the adults concerned. My approach in this study is to look at the extent to which success (as defined by others and by the adults themselves) appears to be achieved in everyday functioning. The focus is therefore on providing opportunities for the participants to suggest, from their own perspectives, the extent to which they believe social competence is achieved. These suggestions are contained in the interview data recorded in chapter four of this project.

During the data collection period, hypotheses have been constructed and tested so that the resulting theories are 'grounded' in the information produced (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). '**Grounded theory**' is theory which has been systematically obtained through "social" research and is grounded in data. Like many qualitative methodologies, the role of grounded theory may be summarised as the careful and systematic study of the relationship of the individual's experience to society and to history. Part of the rationale proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is that, within the field of sociology, there has been too much emphasis on the verification of existing theory and a resultant neglect of the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the subject being researched.

In keeping with its principles, the theory evolves during the research process itself and is a product of continuous interplay between data collection and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1994). The grounded theory method calls for early data collection, analysis, further theoretical sampling and category saturation. Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory in which the researcher collects, codes and analyses the data and decides what data to collect next in order to develop the theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is "controlled" by the emerging theory (Glaser, 1978, p. 36).

Grounded theory is an appropriate methodology for generating theory, where little is already known, or for providing a fresh slant on existing knowledge. It is particularly suited to the study of behaviour. One of the key aspects of this approach, according to Glaser (1978), is the generation of good ideas. Theories developed using this method can be viewed as interpretations made from given perspectives by a researcher who needs to remain open to the essential provisional nature of every theory.

According to the grounded theory philosophy, knowledge is seen as actively and socially constructed and the focus therefore becomes one of how people behave within an individual and social context. In order to proceed, O'Callaghan (1996) argues that the researcher should have:

- A perspective to build analysis from.
- An awareness of substantive issues guiding the research questions.
- A school of thought to help sensitise the emergent concepts.
- A degree of personal experience, values and priorities.

The qualitative nature of the paradigm focuses on the search for meaning and understanding to build innovative theory and not universal laws. Grounded theorists strive to develop fresh theoretical interpretations of the data rather than explicitly aim for any final or complete interpretation of them (Baker *et al.*, 1992). This in itself is possibly the most important part of the process.

Context

This research takes place in the United Kingdom, against a backdrop of ongoing argument and debate related to the most appropriate provision for students with disabilities. Proponents of the inclusion movement, for example, argue that the current educational system needs a major and radical review so that it can become more flexible and able to provide for students with a range of additional needs. Oliver (1990) points to the need to challenge the medical hegemony in special education. He suggests that if children are brought up to believe that they are sick, we should not then be surprised at the levels of passivity and dependence that accompany this role.

Hall (1997) also highlights the existence of two separate education systems, mainstream and special, and suggests that educational reforms in the last decade have done little to enhance the school experiences of children with special needs. Like Gartner and Lipsky (1987), he views the practice of excluding children from mainstream education on the basis of disability as a violation of human rights, particularly when studies indicate that these alternative settings hinder rather than enhance students' academic and social development. According to Hall, failure on the part of educationalists is evident in three areas: service conceptualisation and organisation, staff training and programme evaluation.

Failure to effect any real change despite policy shifts and reform throughout Europe, N. America and Australia has also been explained in terms of fundamental structural deficiencies within the mainstream system (Christensen, 1998). Earlier demands for major reform in special education (Wolfensberger, 1972) reflected a move away from the meritocratic view of social justice and towards a concept based on notions of equity in relation to distribution of resources. Access to mainstream education was seen in terms of fairness of distribution of these resources. According to Skrtic (1991), reforms have been less than effective because they have neglected to take into account critical social functions of special education. These include the creation of a relatively homogenous and controllable population within the sector and the avoidance of confrontation resulting from the failures of current educational practice. Regarding school failure as a deficiency within individuals allows ineffective practices to continue and masks the role of the system in creating problems and failure (Skrtic, 1991).

Opponents of the inclusive movement would, however, argue that special education in the form of segregated provision has remained with us for so long because it provides an effective and equitable means of meeting the needs of children and young adults with disabilities (Gerber, 1988). Furthermore, the notion of inclusion is in itself problematic in that it can refer to a range of models and provision. Full inclusion has been used to describe the process of placing individual students with disabilities full-time

in mainstream classes. Similarly, it has been used to refer to the placement of all students with disabilities in mainstream classes for at least part of the time. Other models suggest that inclusion is the placement of students in mainstream where it is appropriate and argue that separate special schools are part of inclusion plans (Sack, 1997).

Perhaps the focus of the debate has been unnecessarily restricted, in many cases, to issues within the education system and insufficient attention has been given to the wider ranging and long term effects of creating segregated biographies for people with disabilities. There is a marked absence of longitudinal studies in this area and a heavy reliance on case study material like 'snapshots frozen in time' (Woods, 1988, p. 102) of particular instances of integration/inclusion. Booth (1987) highlights the discrepancy between intention and action which has been a feature of successive government policies towards integration. He argues that, where change has not happened, it is because those with the power act in accordance with their own values and priorities.

On a wider scale, the use of concepts such as disability can be used to locate the problem within the individual and legitimise the role of society in creating and maintaining an underclass. Abberly (1987) suggests that disability is a political construct of oppression and that a theory recognising the social origins of impairment and the imposition of additional financial, environmental and psychological disadvantages on people with disabilities provides a useful focus. His approach recognises the value of different modes of living and, like that of Isaacs (1996), highlights the need for services such as education to respect and value people with disabilities and to afford them opportunities to reach their full potential. These ethical considerations are particularly pertinent to my own study.

Oliver (1990) takes up the issue of dependency and outlines the ways in which we, as a society, have created a dependency culture for disabled people. Industrialisation, he argues, has had profound consequences and has led to the establishment of institutions, starting with the workhouses, which have served the purpose of controlling economically unproductive people.

The legislative framework too, Oliver suggests, is locked into a 'professional and administrative approach' and fails to deal with disability as a human rights issue. Finally, there are also a number of ways, suggested by Oliver, in which dependency is created through the delivery of professionalised services. The failure to involve disabled people meaningfully in the running of residential and day care facilities, the transportation of users in specialised transport and the rigidity of the routine activities offered in these 'institutionalised regimes' (p.90) all serve to encourage a level of dependence and passivity in the individual. Even the professional-client relationship can be dependency creating and the language used suggests inequality in the distribution of power. These are all real issues for the students in this study.

It is also important to remember that the study is being carried out in Northern Ireland, a country which differs in significant ways in relation to the education system. The old grammar school system remains in place with many of the learning activities in the upper primary sector geared towards selection for secondary education via the 11 + examination. For many parents, a place for their child in grammar school represents the pinnacle of success. Here 'integration' is about Catholics and Protestants or possibly even about girls and boys, and selection and separation are marked features of the system. In a country where segregation is strongly supported on grounds of religion, sex and academic achievement and where the celebration of difference is often fraught with difficulty there exists an ethos which militates strongly against acceptance and inclusion.

Whereas in England and Wales, legislation introduced in 1971 made all children, irrespective of the degree of disability, the responsibility of local education, rather than the health authorities, in N. Ireland no such legislation was introduced. Children with more severe learning difficulties were deemed 'ineducable' and remained the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Services until 1987, significantly later than in England and Wales and much of the rest of Europe. Prior to the schools being transferred to the Education Boards, all children classed as 'mentally handicapped' attended Special Care schools, managed by Social Services, who were seen

as the most appropriate provider in that they could meet the needs of these children all their lives. Indeed, in 1978, half of the 2000 Special Care school places were filled by adults aged between 16 and 50 (DHSS, 1978). Despite the fact that this environment was frequently not age appropriate, it often represented a better option than the sheltered workshops to which all leavers invariably transferred and remained for the rest of their lives. In these instances, choice was about avoiding the worst scenario rather than selecting the best.

Many of the adults involved in this study have had direct experience of the system outlined above and their parents/carers too have developed expectations about the availability of lifelong care for their offspring. At student review meetings, many parents have made explicit their view that the need for ongoing day care has priority over a quality educational or training programme. Thankfully, in recent years, social services and college personnel have worked collaboratively to develop 'packages', combinations of care and education, so that it is no longer an either/or choice for the individual concerned.

The geography of Northern Ireland is also significant. It is a small region with a population of 1.5 million and many specialist services are centrally located in Belfast. This has implications for those living in remote rural areas. Those with less serious disabilities have historically been integrated into local country schools where numbers are small and a mix of age and ability in one room is the norm (Bunting and McConnell, 1995). In other instances, attendance at the local Special Care school has resulted from an absence of other suitable provision rather than an assessment of severe learning difficulties.

Within the student group involved in this study, instances of both scenarios are to be found. In addition, since they live in an area where there is no industry and limited opportunities for employment even within the general population, the implications in relation to expectations of people with disabilities and their families are obvious. At annual reviews, social services involvement is heavily focused on long-term care needs and on planning

admission to residential accommodation where appropriate. On-going day care, to give families a break, is the priority for social workers and carers alike. While the students themselves dream of fame and fortune they are frequently unable, or unwilling, to articulate any desire to change the current life-style.

It is also significant that, in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of England and Wales, much of the early provision for children with disabilities was the work of religious institutions or charitable organisations. (Bunting and McConnell, 1995). The church here has, however, continued to play a significant role both in relation to attitudes towards disability and in terms of actual provision. On the positive side, it promotes tolerance and acceptance among local communities. This is, however, often linked with an expressed belief that these children are 'gifts from God', 'wee angels from heaven' or a cross that parents are privileged to bear on earth. These comments I have heard on many occasions. In relation to provision, there are a number of church and charitable organisations in this area which organise social events on a regular basis and raise money for annual pilgrimages to Lourdes.

Oliver (1990) describes some charitable organisations as 'quite shameless' (p.93) in the way they reinforce the 'burdens of charity' image through their fund-raising campaigns. He is hostile to the notion of some people begging on behalf of others and suspects that some organisations are not even aware of the way in which they are creating dependency. In my own experience, the focus is very much on caring. One local group is actually called Helping and Nursing the Disabled Society (Hands) and dependency is acknowledged to such an extent that we have fully ambulant students who go off on pilgrimages walking and return in a wheelchair or clinging to a 'helper'. While recognising the irony in this, it highlights the difficulties inherent in attempting to promote skills related to the promotion of independence and inclusion among a group who may have little motivation to become just 'one of the crowd'.

In this section, then, I have begun to highlight many of the issues and challenges involved in the study and understanding of social behaviour

demonstrated by adults with severe learning difficulties. Hopefully, I have, at the same time, highlighted the importance and possible significance of such a study. In the next section, I intend to explore some of the literature related to the development of personal and social identity and to the acquisition of social competence. Familiarity with these domains of theory is, I believe, important in terms of any attempt to make sense of interview data and observable behaviours.

CHAPTER TWO : LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a great many perspectives involved in the understanding and analysis of social behaviour and competence. Consideration of a variety of approaches has been essential as the starting point for a more in-depth literature review. After an initial period of reading extensively it became clear, particularly in the light of emerging research findings, that the most relevant sources were to be found in the realms of social psychology. These related to the identification and classification of behaviours and to the development of personal and social identity among individuals with learning disabilities.

Social Skills

In relation to the development of social competence, I have become interested in the work of Maruyama and Lecount (1992), who suggest that an important part of successful socialisation involves attending to relevant cues and using them to modify behaviour. Burton and Kagen (1995) discuss in some detail problems facing individuals with severe learning difficulties in this area and highlight the need to develop strategy skills for effective functioning. Although recognising the need to understand other people's lives and 'what they want to do' (p.191), the authors subsequently present a model of social competence which is about paying attention, knowing, being aware and understanding (p.192). They do not, in my opinion, pay sufficient heed to the fact that behaviours, which to the observer appear totally ineffective, may have positive outcomes for the individual concerned. Nor, to my mind, do the authors consider satisfactorily the uniqueness of each individual and the personal 'baggage' which is carried into every transaction. My own priority has been to begin to achieve understanding of social behaviours at a deeper level which takes into account the history and perception of the individual concerned.

Motivation is clearly a factor for consideration, particularly in light of the

many negative experiences of 'mainstream' life described by the students. When this is viewed in the context of identity formation and the need for individuals to maintain a congruent self, many behaviours may take on new meanings. Burton and Kagen (1995) locate problems related to social interaction within histories of segregation, lack of opportunity and the identity of client. In common with many other researchers, they do not consider that there may be some kind of payoff for acceptance of this role or that the alternative culture in which they live offers them more in terms of status or quality of life than the harsh real world. Rewards within the 'disabling culture' may well be greater than those outside it.

To begin with, however, we must first attempt to clarify the behaviours which are often seen as indicative of incompetence or ineffective social functioning. I do not agree that they can all be reduced to explanation in terms of skills deficit. For example, 'absence of a desire to communicate' suggests to me motivational or perhaps personality factors rather than the inherent lack of a particular skill. Similarly, rule breaking in the social context may indicate lack of competence but may equally suggest the adoption of a different set of rules or of a strategy with its own set of rewards. Failure to act or behave in a particular way may result from an absence of appropriate skills but may also represent an unwillingness to conform or a desire to 'rebel' within the given situation. Finding meanings for behaviours becomes crucial and to this end I have tried to identify sources related to perception, self and identity which might help to shed light on the issues under consideration.

Personal and Social Identity

Lee (1985) suggests that a useful way of studying social development is through examination of two complementary ideas: socialisation and individuation. I too have found this approach helpful as a means of structuring my thinking in relation to the vast amount of literature available.

Categorisation

By socialisation, Lee is referring to the ways in which we acquire 'socially relevant patterns of behaviour, in other words, how to fit into society' (p.54). In order to reduce the multiplicity of social stimuli we are faced with in everyday life to a smaller, more manageable number of social categories, a process of social categorisation is used. This results in exaggeration of differences between categories and minimises differences within groups. An important consequence is that we not only divide our social world into groups but we see ourselves as belonging to certain categories and not others.

In this way we develop a social identity which can vary from time to time and from situation to situation. An individual's ideas about her/himself are influenced by interaction with others from the same group as much, if not more, than by the larger society (Tajfel, 1978). This is important in relation to people with disabilities who perhaps identify with their peers but at the same time want to disassociate themselves from a group identity which is essentially 'disabled'. It is possible that this motivation is subsequently reflected in social behaviours. Analysis of observation data in this light might, therefore, be rewarding.

Social Domain Theory

Cultural considerations are also important in that institutional and cultural rules about appropriate conduct guide the behaviour of individuals and dictate the relative value which is put on attainments such as wealth, freedom, academic success etc. (Markus *et al.*, 1991). Norms may be unique to a specific interaction, a specific group or a specific institution (Bar-Tal and Bar-Tal, 1988). In terms of social domain theory, the social world is not unitary and people have qualitatively different interactions leading to the construction of different types of social knowledge (Smetana, 1999). The individual's thinking and action are characterised by different

social orientations, motivations and goals. There remains, however, a view of normalisation which is essentially assimilationist, based on the notion that people with disabilities must become more capable of fitting into our society. Inclusion, according to Slee (1997), is about the politics of citizenship and to that end we can learn from anti-racist educators and feminist accounts of the need for policies of recognition. We must attempt to learn more about the rules and value base from which adults with severe learning difficulties operate in order to make better use of the range of motivational factors available to us in our teaching.

Processes of social categorisation and discrimination would also appear to be central to our understanding of the difficulties inherent in interaction between people with severe learning difficulties and the non-disabled world. Williams *et al.* (1993) suggest that, in thinking about members of other social groups/cultures, there is a tendency to assume a homogeneity which does not exist. This is important to me both as a researcher needing to be aware of my own preconceived notions and in relation to identifying the effects of these processes on the individuals concerned.

Stereotyping

Oliver (1990) also proposes the notion of a culture of disability in which people with physical, sensory or learning impairments are stereotyped and seen as more or less than human. He makes reference to media preoccupation with the 'superhuman' achievements of people with disabilities and with the supposed trauma inherent in the experience of loss or impairment. This, he argues, results in a lack of suitable role models for these people and in a failure to present the collective experience culturally. While Oliver is heavily critical of the media's preoccupation with presenting individuals with disabilities as superheroes or pathetic victims, I think this has to be viewed in context. Stories that are entertaining, interesting or newsworthy are inevitably about people who, in some way, are extraordinary. This applies to the population in general and not just to those with disabilities.

It could further be argued that, given Oliver's commitment to the abolition of segregated education, he has chosen to highlight only the negative aspects of life for children with special needs. He includes travelling miles to special schools, having limited access to local peers and being labelled in a destructive and demeaning way. Sadly, within this study, there is data to suggest that these experiences are, indeed, the reality for many people with learning difficulties.

Hall (1997) talks of the need people have to convey sympathy and understanding for the inevitable suffering that is inherent in being labelled 'special' and suggests that this is one of the most difficult burdens people with disabilities have to bear. He further suggests that they must also cope with the stereotyping and patronising attitudes of those who believe they know what it is to have an impairment. Consideration of the student group in terms of their experience of being seen as 'special' is therefore of importance in this study.

Social Roles

Staff roles, and the students' responses to them, are of particular interest in this study where we are seeking to understand motivational factors underlying behaviour. The potential effect of social roles is no more powerfully demonstrated than in Haney *et al's.* (1973) prison simulation study where the rapid social deterioration of the prisoners included loss of personal identity, learned helplessness as a result of the arbitrary control exerted by the guards and a high level of dependency. Initial attempts at rebellion had been undermined and social cohesion among the prisoners had broken down. The model prisoner reaction that developed was passivity, dependence and flattened affect, all characteristics which I will later discuss in the context of the student population involved in this study.

While most teaching staff would, I am sure, be horrified to hear themselves compared to prisoner officers, there are parallels which can be drawn in relation to the distribution of power and control. The longer-term effects of continual reprimands and punishments, evidenced during observation

sessions in this project, might, for example, include an increase in dependency and a growing reluctance to engage in behaviours likely to provoke the wrath of staff. It is vital that, as teachers, we consider the possibility that we are ourselves provoking and maintaining those behaviours of which we are, at the same time, so critical.

It is, of course, important to remember that the Haney prison study has many limitations in relation to its potential contribution to this piece of research. It was a small scale study involving 24 subjects. It lasted only six days, not the anticipated 14, and all the participants were white, middle-class males who had volunteered to take part in the role-play. It does, however, prompt us to consider the suggestion that 'we are what we play' and to look at the relationship between selfhood and the social roles in which we participate.

In the Haney study, prison officers very quickly transformed rights into privileges. In the same way, integration is currently seen as a privilege, or reward, for the least disabled who can, without undue cost, be fitted into mainstream provision. While our schools and colleges do not have the physical trappings of a prison there are a number of barriers to prevent individuals breaking free and joining the 'real' world.

Baker (1991) suggests that these include the collusion of parents and professionals in an 'unwitting conspiracy' which results in the fostering of dependence and limits opportunities for choice and decision making. The existence of separate schools or units and separate transport systems adds, too, to the burden of gaining acceptance in mainstream society. Exclusion from generic services, offensive labels and legislation which provides no rights to mainstream education have been, and still are, the realities for the students in my own study. In addition, they are, according to Hall (1997), the products of a culture within the schools, which is focused on the need to 'cure' pupils. The author describes such provision as oppressive, rejecting, dehumanising and discriminatory.

In contrast, Crockett and Kaufmann (1998) argue that, in many instances, the pay-off for segregation is access to specialised services, provision of

meaningful opportunities to learn and the acceleration of progress. This suggestion is based on information from parents and does not take account of the views of the children themselves or of the long-term effects of being in a separate system. There is perhaps value in considering the extent to which segregated 'special' education meets the needs of parents and carers, at least in the shorter term.

This same system has also been described as one of the main channels for disseminating the predominant able-bodied view of the world and ensuring that children with disabilities leave school socially immature and isolated. This isolation results in 'passive acceptance of social discrimination, lack of skills in facing the tasks of adulthood and ignorance about the main social issues of our times' (BCODP, 1986, p.6). The myth of 'eternal children' (p.6) is perpetuated and the young people do not have the skills or motivation to overcome it. The impact of this experience, on the individuals concerned, clearly requires serious consideration.

Practices of Exclusion

It would seem, therefore, in light of the above, that the process of becoming a 'social being' is potentially problematic for people with disabilities. There are clear issues related to power and control and Shotter (1973) makes an important point when he reminds us that, often, being accepted or belonging, is not within the power of the individual. Practices of exclusion exist in all communities and there are real difficulties inherent in attempting to participate in a culture which is not welcoming to particular groups.

The students' self histories suggested the clear influences of particular cultures and times and their accounts of moments of crisis reflect, I think, attempts at meaning-making and the self-imposed tests of self-understanding suggested by Josselson (1995). Refusal by particular hierarchies to accept these individuals at critical times was interpreted by the students in the light of prior and subsequent experiences and this is in keeping with the suggestion from Oliver (1990) that the responses of adults to their disabilities inevitably reflect both history and ideology.

Harris (1994) suggests that those who find social interaction problematic may eventually opt out or remain on the periphery of social groups because they cannot cope with the social roles and routines. Unlike Shotter, Harris locates the decision within the individual rather than the group, which may or may not be welcoming. It might be important to give more thought to the differing opinions here. If exclusion is the result of rejection by a particular group, as suggested by Shotter, we ought to be concerned with effecting change in the attitudes and behaviours of that group. If the decision not to be included lies with the individual our focus might be on the development of appropriate skills for coping. In reality, any successful approach is likely to be a combination of the two, since positive change in one of the areas will inevitably have an effect on the other.

Whatever the reasons, Harris suggests that, while opting out, these individuals are likely to engage in a range of exploratory behaviours and will sooner or later come up with a behaviour which prompts a dramatic response from other people. This, as an expression of personal power, is likely to be repeated and may pose serious dilemmas for the teacher. It would perhaps be of more value to look at the issue in terms of cultural difference or diversity in relation to the use of social behaviours. Whenever there is interaction between people who do not share the same schemas in relation to acceptable social norms, the result, according to Goleman (1998), is embarrassment, social friction or outright anxiety. In this case, however, there would be the recognition that the students are operating from a different value and cultural base and that the problem is not simply one of incompetence on their part.

Interpersonal Relationships

What then are the effects of living in a situation where the identity assigned to one's particular group is perhaps undesirable or even unacceptable and where inclusion in 'mainstream' society is problematic?

Richardson and Ritchie (1989) studied 64 adults, all of whom had learning difficulties. The interviewees were selected by care staff to represent the

range of community settings (staffed homes and hostels, independent living accommodation and the parental home) from which they came. Carers and a small number of parents (13) were also interviewed.

Two major themes emerged. First, the majority of adults spent a high proportion of their time in the company of others. There is a clear link here with the students involved in my own study who were described by one of the classroom assistants interviewed as 'living their lives in a group'. Second, despite the level of contact, there appeared to be a limited range of real connections or relationships. These tended to be with members of the family and paid or voluntary workers. Close friendships were inevitably with those with whom they lived or worked.

These findings are very much in keeping with an earlier study (Atkinson and Ward, 1987) which looked at the social contact of 42 individuals who had moved from hospital into the community. The suggestion from this research was that people with learning difficulties do not so much lack friends as lack 'non-handicapped' ones. Defining social contacts as 'people seen regularly and frequently who offer some level of support', Atkinson and Ward found that, of the individuals studied, all had 5 - 24 contacts of some kind. Further analysis, however, showed that, in relation to social contacts such as friends without disabilities, neighbours and acquaintances, individual numbers ranged from 0 - 12. These contacts were, most frequently, neighbours and acquaintances such as the postman and pub landlord. The researchers stressed the part played by paid workers in both performing a supportive friendship role and, at the same time, representing a potential barrier to ordinary social contact.

Richardson and Ritchie (1989) also highlight the lack of peer companionship for people living in the parental home and suggest that this is related to the desire to protect them from unnecessary risk. The parents interviewed all acknowledged some degree of protectiveness and highlighted practical restrictions on their son or daughter's ability to develop a more varied social life. In relation to all the adults, issues related to lack of choice and ownership, confined social circles, high levels of

segregation and lack of support in creating and maintaining friendships were evidenced.

There are, of course, difficulties related to studies of the type outlined. Conceptually, the notion of friendship is beset with analytical confusion. Richardson and Ritchie (1989), for example, define it in terms of the three functions of intimacy, company and practical help and stress the key aspect of intimacy. At the same time, they acknowledge that there are people who are sociable and gregarious but who have little desire to achieve close intimacy outside of sexual relationships. Do these individuals then not have friends? The authors do not, in my view, adequately address this question and instead prefer to argue that it is not the label attached to the relationship which is important but what people get from it. Perhaps, the logical extension to this suggestion is that, as a concept, friendship is unique to each individual and is what we want it to be.

This has major implications, then, for research in this area. In order to qualitatively or quantitatively assess friendship patterns we need first to understand what it means to each individual concerned. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that people with learning difficulties may not always find it possible to conceptualise and express the less tangible aspects of relationships. Richardson and Ritchie (1989) acknowledge that only a small number of people with severe disabilities were interviewed and attribute this to the selection made by care staff and to the skills and resources of the research team. In addition, qualitative work of this kind is inevitably time consuming and is often restricted to small, manageable samples. The findings cited above are however in keeping with those of other researchers (Rosen and Berchard, 1990; Frank *et al.*, 1990; Kregel *et al.*, 1986) who suggest that adults with learning disabilities have limited outlets and few reciprocal relationships outside the home.

These findings are also interesting in the light of a significant volume of theory suggesting that personal relationships are key contributors to the overall quality of life (Argyle, 1994; Howitt *et al.*, 1989; Gross *et al.*, 1997). They also relate to my own observation and interview data suggesting that

some students make little attempt to interact with others or to establish and maintain relationships. Social contacts, particularly with non-disabled peers also appear to be extremely restricted. This absence of affiliative behaviour, defined by Cardwell (1996) as the tendency for people to seek the company of others, prompts us to ask if the usual reasons for such behaviours do not exist among this group i.e. the need to avoid loneliness, the search for support or the desire to attract attention. It is also possible that these same needs do exist but, in the experience of the students, have never been met through relationships with their peers. This would be in keeping with Richardson and Ritchie's (1989) suggestion that a high value is placed on relationships with non-disabled people which serve to make them feel accepted and to provide advice and support.

I think more work needs to be done in terms of finding ways in which we can access the views and opinions of those with serious learning difficulties since those studies mentioned above continue to rely on methodological approaches which make assumptions in relation to intellectual and verbal ability. Wood and Duck (1995) also suggest that there has been insufficient research done in respect of relationships among those more marginalised groups in society. They argue that there is clear need to give these groups a voice and a chance to express a perspective which challenges the accepted white, middle-class view of what is normal and acceptable.

Sense of Self

Self-concept and Self-esteem

At the same time as we are acquiring skills necessary for successful integration into society, we are also developing our own personal identity, a process which is essentially differentiating (Damon, 1983), and which has, at its core, the acquisition of a sense of self, the self-concept. This, according to Purkey (1988) refers to ‘.. the totality of a complex, organised and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence.’

The value put upon our self-image links closely to a sense of self esteem and is reflected in the relationship between the self concept and the ideal self - the way we would like to be (Lee, 1985). While some authors use the terms interchangeably, self-esteem is more accurately used in connection with evaluative and affective aspects of the self-concept. Franken (1994) goes as far as to suggest that it is this concept that is perhaps the basis for all motivated behaviour in that it gives rise to ‘possible selves’ which create the motivations.

This work reflects some of the earliest theories of self, including that proposed by Mead in 1934. It was heavily influenced by Cooley’s (1902) notion of the ‘looking-glass self’ and was based on the belief that, in order to understand what we are like, we need to see how others see us. Mead also viewed the self as a process, rather than a structure, and saw its uniqueness in terms of its ability to act upon and respond to itself. In this way, he was making the I/Me distinction, the ‘I’ as knower and the ‘Me’, ‘self as known’. While recognising the importance of language as a means by which we represent ourselves, Mead saw the key process as being that of ‘role-taking’. Only by being able to put ourselves in the position of others and see ourselves from their viewpoint can we develop a sense of self. Kelly (1955), like Cooley and Mead, argues that we paint a picture of ourselves based on our picture of the picture other people have of us. Again, the central

evidence is the reaction of others.

Franken (1994) is particularly interested in the fact that, through the processes of action and reflection, the self-concept can be modified or changed and the person can develop a more powerful way of viewing her or himself. This is important if we accept the view that a well-developed self-concept is essential for optimal psychological functioning (Campbell et al., 1996). It has further been suggested that having a strong sense of self entails at least three components: stable and secure feelings of self-worth, a strong sense of self-determination and a clearly and confidently defined self-concept (Kernis et al., 2000). Where self-knowledge is confused or conflicted it is unlikely to provide a meaningful input into behaviours and responses and may lead to a blind and heightened responsiveness to salient contextual cues (Campbell, 1990). Self-concepts which are unclear will therefore change more readily and more frequently in response to others.

While much of the research has focused on the knowledge and evaluative aspects of the self, there is then a growing interest in the dynamic processes and in the fact that some aspects of the self-concept are not stable across time and situation. Nezlek and Plesko (2001) suggest that an understanding of daily changes in self-concept clarity could be helpful in this respect. Their studies support the view that negative events, such as failure and rejection, have a much stronger impact on self-concept clarity than positive experiences. However, there is, in the studies, an assumption that daily events change mood, self-esteem and the clarity of the self-concept. It is also possible that the reverse causal sequence exists ie. that low self-esteem leads to the selection of more negative events or situations. The extent to which structural and evaluative aspects of the self-concept affect, and are affected by, external events requires further research and analysis.

Rogers (1980) identifies three conditions as being essential for the development of self-actualizing individuals: genuineness, unconditional acceptance and empathy. These, he argues, should be features of the relationship between any two human beings and should direct them towards self-actualization, the inherent tendency of all individuals to develop her/his

capacities to their fullest potential. Unfortunately most individuals, in order to maintain conditional positive regard, suppress actions and feelings seen as unacceptable by others. They develop and internalise 'conditions of worth' which subsequently dictate behaviour and deny true thoughts and feelings. This prompts me to consider the extent to which the adults in the current study behave and think in particular ways because others want them to. To what extent are they living by other people's standards rather than their own?

Rogers suggests that where there is a discrepancy between the self-concept and external cues, incongruence occurs. Experiences and feelings which conflict with our self-image are threatening and so may be denied access to our conscious awareness. This prevents the self-concept from developing, widens the gap between self-image and reality and can result in feelings of confusion, dissatisfaction and vulnerability. The person, according to Rogers, may eventually become seriously maladjusted.

Argyle (1969) suggests that people, in general, see themselves better than is justified, closer, in other words, to the ideal self and argues that it is other people's reactions which prevent these inflated perceptions from going too far. In the case of adults with severe learning difficulties who may have difficulty in attending to external cues or who may receive less than honest feedback from their non-disabled carers and/or peers, the ideal self may be perceived as the reality. Unchallenged, an inflated self-image can be sustained. Intensive, inappropriate feedback of a more negative kind can, of course, also result in a self image which is skewed or damaged.

Argyle (1994) suggests that the reactions of other people have most impact when the other person is cared for or respected, when they are perceived as 'expert' and when they are seen as unbiased. The importance of messages and feedback from other people is also highlighted by Hampson (1982) and by Cooley (1983) who reminds us that certain people are more significant in our lives than others. For the students in this study it will be important to identify the key players in relation to them.

Argyle (1994) expresses concern that, while teachers and parents readily

give full feedback to children, this is not the case with adults with whom it would not be polite or acceptable. There is a need, he suggests, for more tactful, sensitive and non-verbal feedback for people but he does not address the issue of feedback for adults who are not able to readily read or understand messages of this type. Argyle does not make distinctions between children with and without learning disabilities although other research, quoted elsewhere in this study, highlights the role played by others in protecting people with disabilities from information which might be threatening or distressful. This suggests one means of understanding why, in some cases, the self-image of people with learning disabilities appears to be skewed.

Argyle also highlights the role of comparison in relation to self-image and argues that it is only by comparing ourselves with siblings, friends and others who are frequently available that we come to see ourselves as we do. Viewing ourselves in relation to others who are similar plays a key role in relation to self perception but I think this is a particularly complex issue in relation to people with learning disabilities. Comparison with siblings and neighbours, for example, results in a set of perceptions which would be quite different from those arising, perhaps, from comparison with schoolfriends (all of whom have learning disabilities and many of whom may have additional impairment). What comparisons then are made and how does the person with learning disabilities manage the conflicting messages?

The need for self-esteem, according to Argyle (1994), is usually limited by reality and if this does not happen behaviour becomes 'absurd and preposterous' (p.200). A person's self-esteem depends jointly on her/his position on a number of evaluative dimensions and upon the value placed on each of these dimensions. Interestingly, Argyle suggests that esteem is not any lower among members of minority groups subjected to discrimination, probably because it depends on the evaluation of, and comparison with, individuals in the same group.

Thirdly, Argyle (1994) highlights the importance of social roles and describes how people ascribe to themselves the properties of the roles and

evaluate themselves in this context. I think this could be important in terms of understanding why some participants in this study have consistently expressed intense commitment to the goal of remaining a student. At the same time, this has seemed to be a stressful and, sometimes, unhappy, experience for them. Is it possible that they view a return to the Adult Training Centre as being an even more negative experience? It is also possible that the desire to be seen as something as acceptable as 'student' has become a prime motivating force in these students' lives and that they have become conditioned to believe that nothing beyond this role is achievable.

Argyle also talks about how children model themselves on parents, teachers and a range of other people whom they admire and want to be like. He further suggests that this process has an influence on the self-image in that experiments have shown that people feel they already resemble the model. Again, this is perhaps relevant to our attempt to understand those students who described themselves as being most like a tutor or other member of staff. We are prompted to look at why these individuals have not moved on from this process. It is perhaps related to the experience of adolescence when most children move from playing roles to experimenting with them and progressing towards what Argyle calls identity achievement.

In the case of young people with learning disabilities the same opportunities for experimentation are not available and the transition to adulthood is therefore made all the more difficult. As teenagers, the students in my own study were subject to the same restrictions in relation to choice and opportunity as they had been as children. There was no suggestion that they had taken on new roles or responsibilities within or outside the family. Even the student role was 'diluted' in that they were transported to and from college in a Social Services bus, they attended a discrete course which was not based on the main site and they had lunch and breaks on their own.

While findings related to self-concept and self-awareness have varied in relation to students with learning difficulties (see reviews by Chapman, 1988; McPhail and Stone, 1995), there is an increasing body of literature suggesting that these students frequently show strong self-concepts, perceive

themselves as capable and rate themselves higher than external raters (Grolnick and Ryan, 1990; Priel and Lesham, 1990; Vaughn *et al.* 1990). Consideration of possible explanations for these findings, particularly if they are still applicable in adulthood, must take into account the background and ongoing experiences of the individuals concerned.

The Family

Todd and Sheam's (1997) study describes the role played by parents in relation to their adult offspring's experience of the world. Through the strategic control of information these parents were successful in minimising the extent to which disability influenced the development of identity. Acting as gatekeepers, they prevented concerns and issues from reaching their sons/daughters, which resulted in a lack of congruity between the self-image of these adults and the identity attributed to them by the outside world. According to the authors, a false construction of the world coupled with the creation of fictional biographies hides the truth of 'a restricted and oppressive lifestyle' (pp. 341 - 366). Goleman (1998) also highlights the potential role of the family in protecting and colluding. This collusion, he suggests, is maintained by directing attention away from the 'fearsome fact' or by 'repackaging its meaning in an acceptable format' (p.17). By preventing their offspring from discovering themselves as different, and therefore developing a moral career with a stigmatised role (Goffman, 1968), these parents were also denying them the opportunity to challenge injustices of which they were unaware.

This theme is taken up by Finkelstein and Stuart (1996), who see disabled people '...marinated in a disabling culture' (p. 176). They argue that any child with an impairment must have the same opportunities to develop social skills as her/his non disabled peers and highlight the role played by parents and professionals in protecting these children from responsibility and risk. If parents fail to rear their children in a way which promotes appropriate social adjustment they may therefore be accused of behaving in a way which is unethical or immoral. This, they argue, is because over- or under-helping

prevents the child from acquiring abilities, skills and attitudes that are the essential ingredients of psychological development.

Living in a community where children with severe learning difficulties are placed in segregated educational environments from the age of 2 ½, I would personally query the ability of parents to provide adequate opportunities for social adjustment. This would certainly be extremely difficult given the lack of resources and in the context of current professional and societal attitudes towards disability. The dilemma facing many parents here was highlighted recently when the mother of a child with Downs Syndrome was taken to court because of her refusal to transfer her son to a special school. She was warned by the magistrate that she would face a substantial fine if she did not “change her attitude” (Grattan, 1998). Parental influences and expectations are therefore likely to be significant in any study of this type.

Social cognitive theory (SCT)

Over a decade ago, Albert Bandura developed his years of basic research using a behaviourist and social learning framework into what he called social cognitive theory (SCT). In SCT, learning is viewed as knowledge acquisition through cognitive processing of information. The social part acknowledges the social origins of much of human thought and action (what individuals learn by being part of a society) and the cognitive aspect recognizes the influential contribution of thought processes to human motivation, attitudes, and action. Drawing from this, Bandura has advanced the concept of self-efficacy. This construct deals specifically with how people's beliefs in their capabilities to affect the environment control their actions in ways that produce desired.

Viewed superficially, self-efficacy appears very similar to self-esteem and locus of control/attribution concepts of personality and motivation. Although conceptually similar, self-esteem and self-efficacy are quite different. Self-esteem is often portrayed as a global construct that represents a person's self-evaluations across a wide variety of different situations. In contrast, self-efficacy is the individual's conviction about a task- and

context-specific capability. Second, self-esteem tends to be more stable, whereas self-efficacy changes over time as new information and task experiences are obtained. Finally, self-esteem is based on a reflective evaluation of the self (e.g., feelings of self-worth) that is usually derived from perceptions about several personal characteristics (intelligence, integrity, and the like). In contrast, individuals may have high self-efficacy for some tasks and low self-efficacy about others. Neither of these results in an increase or a decrease in their overall self-esteem.

Locus of control, as a widely recognized variable in the theory of personality and motivation proposed by Rotter *et al.* (1962), is also often wrongly treated as analogous to self-efficacy. People with an internal locus of control believe they are in control of their own fate, feel that their actions have an impact on the environment, and assign personal responsibility for the consequences of their own behaviour. In contrast, individuals with an external locus of control take the consequences of their lives as the result of destiny, luck, chance, or any other random factor.

Bandura has strongly argued that Rotter's conceptual scheme is primarily concerned with causal beliefs about action-outcome contingencies. Personal efficacy, on the other hand, refers to an individual's convictions about his or her abilities to successfully execute a specific task. Individuals who perceive themselves as highly efficacious engage fully with the task and are more likely to succeed. The successful outcomes further reinforce expectations of self-competency. However, those with low self-efficacy are more likely to cease their efforts prematurely, fail at the task, and retain self-debilitating expectations about their personal competence.

Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory suggests that perceived inefficacy in coping with negative events produces fearful expectations and avoidance behaviour. The focus is not on the presence or absence of essential skills but on beliefs about the extent to which those skills can be used effectively. Students may know what to do but often do not behave optimally because greater effort to overcome challenges is dependent on a strong sense of efficacy. This sense is influenced by such factors as previous experience of

the task, situational factors, perceptions of ability, verbal persuasion and psychological arousal. Much of the observed student behaviour in classroom situations can, I believe, be usefully interpreted using this model. The special school system, which according to Hall (1997) is life and image defining for some children, is heavily focused on special places, special labels, special therapies and special charities. The impact of this experience on the young people cannot be ignored, particularly in relation to how they assess their own capabilities and potential achievements.

Attributions

Understanding of the individual's value system and motivations is essential if we are to make an informed analysis of behaviours observed. Weiner's attributional model of achievement-related behaviour (Weiner, 1974, 1979) and Bar-Tal's (1988) model of classroom interaction suggest that students who attribute failure to stable- uncontrollable causes such as ability are not motivated to perform with intensity. The way in which students perceive the causes of behavioural or academic performance determines whether or not they will assume responsibility for change. If they do not see themselves as having control over the causes of success or failure they will make no attempt to remedy the situation. Where success is achieved it is also important that this success is attributed to personal effort and is 'owned' by the student.

Abramson *et al.* (1978) and Peterson (1992) are concerned with the phenomenon of learned helplessness – a situation in which attribution leads the individual to believe that no action they could take would lead to future success. Symptom-focused coping, involving an attempt to regulate emotional responses and reduce the effects of the stressful situation may result (Edwards, 1988). In this context, in the current study, it will be important to identify instances of maladaptive passivity, histories of uncontrollability and the belief that outcomes are not dependent on responses. Again there are issues around the use of terms such as 'maladaptive' since, what may be non-productive for one person may achieve a desired outcome for another.

There is also value in looking at staff perceptions of why students fail to achieve and to explore the message this gives about how disability is viewed by them. Graham and Weiner (1986) suggest that anger or pity are frequently the teachers' first responses to a negative classroom outcome and relate these to the extent to which the student is seen as being in control of events. A number of studies have highlighted sharp discrepancies between the self-assessment of students with learning difficulties and teacher ratings which tended to be much lower (Graham *et al.*, 1993; Vaughn *et al.*, 1990). Investigation of these discrepancies will be an important aspect of the current study.

Emotional Intelligence

In recent years, a number of psychologists (Sternberg, 1985; Gardner, 1993) have been concerned to develop a theory or theories of intelligence which recognise that social intelligence is both distinct from academic abilities and the source of what it is that makes people do well in the practicalities of life.

Salovey and Mayer (1990) suggest that self-awareness is the keystone and stress the powerful influence of subconscious emotions on how we think and act. Becoming aware of our feelings is, they argue, the essential building block towards control and management of them. One common strategy for surviving troubled situations is repression, a tactic of remaining unflappable in all situations. This, while perhaps a successful strategy for emotional self-regulation, may involve an unknown cost to self-awareness. Clearly, this thinking is relevant in relation to interview material suggesting both lack of awareness and emotional response.

According to Goleman (1996), interpersonal abilities are founded on emotional intelligences. He warns, however, that, in some cases social skills are developed to the detriment of a sense of personal need. Some people, he suggests, will say or do anything to win social approval and to be what other people want them to be. He refers to such individuals as 'social chameleons' who are content to live with the discrepancy between public face and private

reality (p.119). I am prompted to wonder if this thinking is relevant in relation to those students in my own study who demonstrated high levels of acquiescence and agreed with even the most damning accounts of themselves given by college staff.

In a subsequent publication, Goleman (1998) focuses again on the crucial role played by the unconscious but, specifically, in relation to its role in creating and maintaining psychological defences. He suggests that, where there is fear of painful information, the mind creates blind spots in attention so that the locus of the predicted pain is obliterated. This inattention shields the individual from painful truths but, when it becomes habitual, character and personality are shaped by on-going self-deceits. A social reality, complete with zones of 'tacitly denied information' (p.23) is constructed, often with the involvement of other family, or group, members. Again, we are led to look again at the family and the crucial role they play in relation to identity formation among children and adults with learning difficulties.

Summary

In grounded theory, reading is important during the initial stages, but in a substantive field different from the research. This is particularly important during the early stages of data collection. Comparable works are not consulted in order to avoid internalising the perspectives and hypotheses of researchers in the same or similar fields of study. However, once the theory is developed, such related work is analysed in order to draw comparisons, build on, or offer an alternative perspective.

In the initial stages, my own reading was wide and fairly voracious and cursory consideration was given to any body of literature which I believed could potentially make a contribution to my study. This reading was at a general level and did not involve the identification of other pieces of research which might be similar to my own since I wanted to avoid the contamination of other researchers' data or theories. Clearly, this is only possible to a degree since reading inevitably involves the transmission of facts and ideas. However, by searching widely, and in areas not specifically

connected with disability, such as those theories concerned with the development of the self, I was able to identify potentially helpful bodies of theory without accessing existing studies closer to my own. Following the initial data collection, the literature review became more selective and more focused on issues related to identity, self-esteem, exclusion, relationships and the role of the family. These had emerged as significant concerns for the participants in the study. As the stage two work progressed the literature review continued to follow the data and to become increasingly specific to disability and to my own project.

In selecting literature that was related to my topic, or area of concern, I was anxious not to limit the scope of the search unduly, thereby omitting work which, while not directly about my own issues, could be of considerable interest to me. The research question under investigation has many facets and the possible contribution of a variety of disciplines needs recognition. On a practical note, this raised difficulties in terms of the time and organisation involved and of the number of 'false starts' which later proved to be of little relevance to the study. Doubtless, I have still managed to make omissions but this review does represent a genuine attempt at delimiting the topic and opening up new perspectives.

A second concern for me, in the early stages, was the need to retrieve the full sum of the literature in each of the identified areas of interest in order to achieve an acceptable level of comprehensiveness. Given the number of separate but related bodies of theory with which I was working, it soon became clear that an exhaustive collection of literature in relation to each was not feasible. The literature outlined above represents, therefore, an attempt to identify and use what I consider to be the most up-to-date and relevant theory that was accessible to me in each of the areas. There is the danger, however, that, in my attempt at breadth of enquiry, depth and a more comprehensive approach, in some instances, have had to be sacrificed.

In the study, I have also been aware of the need to include material that is relevant and current. At the same time, older research and the way in which thinking has developed over the years is in itself of interest, no more so than

in relation to many of the disability issues discussed in this research. I have attempted therefore to include a mix of both past and current information and have used, as my criteria for selection, not only the age of the research but also its relevance to the current project.

It must be noted, however, that it is the mind of the researcher that endows a document with 'relevance', by conceiving a way in which it, or even a small part of it, fits into his/her emerging research scheme (Stoan, 1991). The relevance of a document, then, is not a property of that document but represents a relation between the document and the researcher (Park, 1993). The theories and studies referred to earlier in this section are, in my view, extremely relevant in that they have provided me with a variety of new and different perspectives on the topic area. They have also prompted me to think and re-evaluate my position on an on-going basis over the period of the research. In the next chapter, I will discuss, in some detail, a number of other issues, both theoretical and practical, which had a major influence on the research process.

CHAPTER THREE : STRATEGY

Participation and Constructionism in Research

There has been much criticism of existing research in relation to disability (Oliver, 1990). This has been founded largely on the basis that all approaches until now have focused on individual impairment as the root cause of disability and that disabled people themselves have been involved only minimally. When it became clear that to view disability as an individual problem was to provide an inadequate account, the social constructionist model both identified the inherently social nature of the issue and recognised problems of definition. With its heavy emphasis on attitudes, this model too was limited. Ample evidence exists to suggest that attitudinal change cannot be brought about solely by policy development or awareness training (Oliver, 1985). Research of this type was therefore of little functional value. Oliver (1990) suggests that a social creation model, recognising disability as the product of social structures and institutions, provides the most useful framework for research in this area. The focus of my own study is therefore very much on the creation and maintenance of disabling environments and the impact of this on the individuals concerned. The importance of gaining the views of those most affected, and of attempting to understand the meanings they make of their situation, cannot be overestimated.

This piece of research takes place against a backdrop of increasing demands for evaluations resulting from a significant number of curricular initiatives in the 1960s (Atkinson *et al.*, 1993). At the same time we have seen a move from quantitative to qualitative approaches in relation to providing teachers with images of their work which would generate reflection and encourage development (Stenhouse, 1975; Hustler *et al.*, 1986). The idea of the teacher-as researcher appears to have emerged partly from curriculum reform within schools but also from a shift away from the bureaucratic model of curriculum development, where innovations were developed by

'experts' and adopted by teachers (Hammersley, 1993). The process of teaching, as a skilled and locally managed activity, was emphasised and a view of the teacher as a professional practitioner, constantly reflecting on her/his work, was reinforced.

My own approach to this project has been essentially ethnographic, in that I have been preoccupied with searching for meanings and attempting to suspend my own preconceptions in the hope of discovering new perspectives. By immersion in the research setting, I have attempted to reach some understanding of the actions of the participants from their perspective and of the context in which those actions occur. The ethnographic researcher normally needs to spend extended periods of time within the organisation in order to gain the necessary depth of understanding. Data collection usually relies on field-notes, perhaps supplemented by interviews and organisational documentation. The attraction of ethnography lies in its ability to generate extensive, rich and detailed data.

This approach, with its origins in the field of social anthropology, is primarily concerned with issues related to cultural meaning and to the participant's point of view. The need to understand events as perceived by the participants and to learn the meanings attached to them is paramount. There are, of course, significant, epistemological issues related to the extent to which one individual can ever really access and understand another's point of view. The tentative and exploratory nature of the findings must therefore be acknowledged and the research as a whole viewed as only one step in the direction of greater understanding and insight.

In the field of disability, Edgerton (1967) used anthropological methods to study the effects of stigma on people with severe learning difficulties in American society and Farber (1968) introduced the concept of 'surplus population' to explain the social status of such individuals. While Farber recognised the limiting effects of being labelled deviant he did, however, continue to relate life-chances to levels of incompetence. The important question here relates not to the causes of the disability but to the reasons

why it is such a problematic issue in some cultures and not others. In our own society, the relationship between social and economic factors under capitalism has been recognised as a major contributing factor in relation to the exclusion of people with disabilities. Farber (1968), however, also highlights the part played by values and ideology in the creation and maintenance of an underclass.

Given that the position of people with disabilities in society will vary over time, place and circumstance, their personal responses and identity cannot be explored without reference to both history and ideology. There is then a strong cultural context to identity formation and the possible existence of a 'culture of disability' must be acknowledged. Researchers, such as Kenneth Gergen (1985), who are proponents of the social constructionist model, view all knowledge as being historically and culturally specific. The suggestion is that, in order to achieve real understanding, the researcher must concern her/himself, not only with the individual, but also with the social, political and economic circumstances of the time (Gergen, 1985; Crawford, 1995). The self, as a social construction, becomes the focus of enquiry and the questions to be addressed relate to:

‘... how we came to be, feel and think the way that we do, given the discursive and social practices of our culture and the specific locations that we occupy in it.’ (Gross *et al.*, 1997, p.41).

In the course of this project, I have also become increasingly aware of the role of social interaction and, more specifically, language as a means not only of expression but also of constructing and sustaining knowledge. According to discourse analysis, there is a risk, for researchers, in assuming that the 'facts' of a story are 'given' and problem free. Potter and Edwards (1990) argue that this set of assumptions is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between words and reality. Processes of perception, selection and expression are all involved in so-called 'neutral description'. In forming our own points of view, we must keep in mind that accounts can only ever represent someone else's version of what happened

and that people will frame their version in the most credible and persuasive way that they can.

The propositions outlined above have significant implications for the current study. In themselves they pose a number of important questions. To what extent are the students' experiences, and perceptions of those experiences, influenced by other people's versions of 'reality'? By the same token, to what extent is the 'non-disabled' population influenced by the accounts of people with disabilities? Perhaps, even more alarming, is the possibility that, if descriptions are inevitably subjective and value laden, then they are of little use to me as a researcher seeking out the facts. I think this is not so. The 'facts' in which I am particularly interested, in this study, are the realities of the students' perspectives. I also believe that answers are to be found, not only in the content of what is said but in the process of the saying. The choices which respondents make in relation to information remembered and recounted are possibly as important as the information itself. Equally, while accounts will not reflect one 'neutral' reality, there is much to be learned from the ways in which people opt to present themselves and their stories. This is what might give us a glimpse of the perceptions, values and beliefs of people with disabilities.

Politics of Method

It is generally accepted that interpretative ethnography has, as its focus, cultural meaning rather than social action (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). My priority has been to identify and record significant behaviours as a means of stimulating thought and debate. I have been concerned with the relationships between institutions, beliefs and value systems and the role played by these in perpetuating social systems. This separation of understanding and application has, however, become an increasing issue as the project has developed. I have become aware that, in many cases, the students were unaware of the issues which, in my view, resulted so frequently in a devalued status for them. They were clearly not politicised to any extent (Oliver, 1990). Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggest that research should contribute to, rather than stand apart from, egalitarian interests. This raises

fundamental questions as to the role played by the research process itself in relation to both increasing awareness and motivating people to challenge existing practices. According to Fay (1977):

“ Changing people’s basic understanding of themselves and their world is a first step in their radically altering the self-destructive patterns of interaction that characterise their social relations” (p.204).

At face value this seems to make a lot of sense. However, on deeper reflection, there are a number of issues involved. Who is, or should be, the agent of change? Has anyone the right to attempt this type of change in another person? Clearly, there are power issues involved, assumptions that the individual’s understanding is, in some way, impaired or inadequate. How can we know such things for certain? In addition, to describe behaviour as self-destructive is to make a negative judgement of it. What might appear self-destructive might, in fact, be serving a useful, but not apparent, purpose for the person involved. While the above issues are of tremendous interest to me, they are clearly too complex and profound to be effectively or comprehensively explored within the context of this project. I do think it is important for individuals to be aware of issues affecting them and, in the case of people with learning difficulties, I think they need assistance with this. I think, however, that the ‘assistance’ should take the form of making knowledge accessible to those concerned. I am less happy with the notion of trying to change other people. I believe there is little moral justification for this and that it involves serious issues related to power and responsibility.

Ethical Issues

General

There are a number of ethical issues with which I have been preoccupied in the course of this research. Those best qualified to pass judgement on whether or not a piece of research is ethically acceptable are the members of

the population from which the participants have been selected. In this case, the fact that the main players have severe learning difficulties is significant in terms of the 'monitoring' role which is needed. An 'easy' solution might be to consult their parents/carers or others acting in an advocacy role for them. Indeed, keeping other people informed and seeking parental/carer permission at various stages throughout the exercise was a priority for me. However, in the course of the research, a number of concerns around the ability and right of other people to act in the best interests of the adults involved were highlighted. Giving the final say in relation to the acceptability, or otherwise, of the project, to other people seems to me to be yet another way in which power is taken from the participants. The range of ability within the group has meant that, in a few cases, I feel the students were able to make an informed decision while, in others, the level of understanding was questionable. In the final instance, decisions about what should and should not be included were made by the more academically able of the group and I am left with concerns about the involvement of those who were not able to fully grasp the meaning of the project. I am going to have to live with that and hope that it is justifiable on the basis that the outcomes of the work, in the longer term, will be to the students' advantage.

Consent

As stated above, the problem of obtaining informed consent from the students involved in the project has been significant. I explained, at the beginning of the project, and at different times throughout, the purpose and plan for what I was doing. I used language which I knew from experience they could understand and encouraged the students to feed back to me what I had said. Again this was effective only in some cases. Permission was also sought from parents and carers although I was uncomfortable doing this, particularly in relation to those students who could understand fairly well what was involved. It felt as if I too was colluding in preventing people from making decisions about their own lives.

Deception

The nature of this particular project has meant that I was able to be very open and honest with all participants in relation to the objectives and methods governing the work. Problems, however, began to emerge as the data began to accumulate. Issues relating to the practice and competence of staff members and supervisors began to emerge. I was uncomfortable, too, with being in situations where I felt that an appraisal of the situation/interaction was likely to involve some form of criticism, implicit or otherwise, of the people involved. Similarly, in parent interviews, I found myself responding negatively (at an emotional level) to some of the views and attitudes expressed. To attribute 'blame' to these parents for some of their offsprings' more negative experiences felt like a betrayal of trust. All the parents had been extremely co-operative and helpful and I did not want to repay these kindnesses with a negative account of the part they have played in the lives of the students.

In attempting to address these issues, I have tried first and foremost to let the data speak for themselves and to avoid passing judgement. As discussed above, however, even the process of selecting what and what not to include is in itself value laden. I must accept responsibility, therefore, for the light in which I have chosen to present the participants in the study.

Secondly, I have remained conscious, throughout, of the need to make explicit the varying perspectives involved. This, too, has hopefully helped to maintain a more balanced perspective. Finally, in presenting my findings, both in the written work and in the verbal feedback to the students, I have taken, as my focus, the positive outcomes which have resulted and the potential for making the future better. There is a real danger here that I have become involved in a process of 'watering down' the data so that it is palatable for all those involved. I have, however, followed an unwritten personal rule which dictates that, if any piece of information, revealed in the course of the research, would cause distress, or would breach confidentiality, then I would not use it in the final dissertation. Instead, I would attempt to locate and use other data which would support the same

point or hypothesis. I think this has worked reasonably well for me although I have made decisions not to include material which was important but which ethically I could not justify. This is evidently a weakness in the work, but hopefully an acceptable one.

Withdrawal

I think it has been important, throughout the project, to remind the participants, particularly the students themselves, of their right to withdraw at any time. At times, in the student group interviews, I felt that there was a danger of individuals becoming upset. Each time this happened I reminded them that I would not be annoyed if they wished to stop or change the subject. On two occasions, I was taken up on this offer although none of the participants chose to withdraw from the project.

Distorted Perceptions

As a researcher, I have been painfully aware of my own personal history as part of the social life and negotiated understandings that I was so keen to study. Distortion of perceptions has always been a possibility, given my established role in the lives of the participants. In addition, the types of activity involved in research of this genre place heavy demands on the social relations skills of the researcher (Ball, 1990). Given the complexity of the settings under study, I have, at times, experienced myself as a somewhat faulty of 'in need of refinement' research tool. In light of this, I have relied quite heavily on a personal and 'informal' research biography in which I noted processes, problems, choices and mistakes as they happened.

Generalizability

Finally, I am aware that there is an issue related to the generalizability and, therefore, practical significance of research of this type. Initially, I saw this as a potential difficulty in that my study is specific to a particular, relatively small, group of adults, to a particular place and culture and to a particular point in time. I have become aware, however, that all research is going to be specific to some extent and that this is a reality of life. I have also,

through my exploration of the literature, come to realise that many of the issues affecting the students involved in this project also affect a wide range of people who are, in some way, excluded from mainstream society or provision. In addition, practice issues involving teachers of pupils/students with learning difficulties are often the same issues for all teachers. Good practice is good practice, regardless of the ability or aptitude of the class.

Method: a theoretical defence

Although there is some longitudinal research in learning difficulties, the focus, in many cases, is on one distinct life period and on one particular context (McKinney, 1994). Much of the material available relates, therefore, to academic and cognitive aspects of children studied within the academic context. Raskind *et al.* (1998) suggest that researchers have not taken advantage of the descriptive and explanatory power of the longitudinal method in relation to understanding how the manifestations of the disability evolve and change over time as a function of biologic and environmental factors. They also argue that there is need to explore a wider range of contexts using diverse data gathering strategies.

While time constraints have prohibited the use of a longitudinal approach in this study, I have attempted to use data from a range of contexts and to include areas suggested by Raskind *et al.* (1998) such as interests and values, special abilities, support systems, critical life events and personality characteristics.

There are also, of course, numerous difficulties inherent in any attempted measurement of self-perception and/or the self-concept. Shavelson *et al.* (1976) and Hattie (1992) argue that many scales are not based on strong theoretical models and that there is a need for a multi-faceted, hierarchical approach. These theories propose the nature of the general self-concept as comprising first-order facets and a number of more specific second order aspects. According to Hattie (1992), self-concept is both a structure and a process. It is, for some people, 'a set of beliefs that dominate processes and actions', while, for others, it is a latent, 'hierarchical and multi-faceted set of

beliefs that mediate and regulate behaviour in various social settings.’ (p.117). The preferred conceptual framework of self-concept will clearly influence the selection of the research tool and there are clearly difficulties in identifying what exactly it is that is being measured.

In addition, given that the self-concept is not stable over time and situation, any assessment is only likely to be relevant in relation to the external environment in which it takes place. Marsh and Yeung (1999) argue that the interpretation of esteem items and the nature of the measurement of the construct are also altered by the content of other items in the survey. In other words, changes in the context can lead to shifts in the mean response to a set of items. They, too, view the self-concept as essentially multi-dimensional and suggest that it is important to measure the different components which are the self-concept. Self-esteem, they argue, should refer to the global self-concept and should not be viewed as the evaluative component of the concept. Like Shavelson *et al.* (1976), Marsh and Yeung see the self-concept as both descriptive and evaluative and recommend that researchers put more emphasis on the specific components related to the content of their study.

Waugh (2001) identifies five aspects of many of the current rating scales which are questionable:

- ◆ Respondents are often forced to agree or disagree. There is no neutral category.
- ◆ It is likely that, due to the exposure of role models, respondents are influenced by their views of what they could be like. Realistic and ideal scales can be confused.
- ◆ It is not always clear to the respondent what is being measured since items are not always separated into sub-scales.
- ◆ Positively and negatively worded items are often mixed to avoid the fixed-response syndrome but this can cause an interaction effect between items.
- The analysis of data is usually based on total scores using all facets or orientations. Waugh suggests the need to analyse specific self-concept

areas to get a more meaningful picture.

If we add to the difficulties outlined, the fact that the respondents in this research have severe learning difficulties, it becomes clear that the validity of any rating scale is going to be very questionable. The inability to read, mixed with serious problems in understanding some of the terminology and added to difficulties in comprehending the research process would result, not only in an anxiety-producing situation for the students but also in data of the most dubious quality. I therefore chose not to introduce any of the existing rating scales for the sole purpose of my research but instead used simplified exercises (appendices 3-7) designed to elicit responses in relation to very specific aspects of behaviour or appearance. These exercises formed part of the students on-going personal development programme and so the format and method of use were familiar to them. Clearly the worksheets were designed, not to facilitate the research process, but to encourage thought and discussion around specific topics. As such, they are questionable in terms of both reliability and validity. They did however serve the purpose of identifying issues and questions for further exploration. I have also referred to life history material in an attempt to locate the students and their disabilities in real life settings.

Observation

There are a number of measurement instruments which assess behavioural indicators in an educational setting. These include the Behavioral Academic Self-Esteem (BASE) scale (Coopersmith and Gilberts, 1982) and Hamachek's (1995) informal assessment inventory of general behaviours indicative of high and low self-concept. These scales have, however, their own limitations. Wide variations in teachers' perceptions of the frequency of esteem-related behaviours have been noted as have weaknesses in across-rater reliability (Burnett, 1997). This is suggestive of problems associated both with the interpretation of the wording on the scales and with the differing expectations and perceptions of teachers and their subsequent influence on the student group. The importance of detailed guidelines and training in the use of the scales is highlighted.

Given the constraints of time and limited staffing, I chose not to use an inventory as an assessment tool in this research. The wording is problematic and, given that my own student group had severe learning difficulties, I felt this could skew the findings even further. The BASE scale, for example, uses the ability to make decisions and to show self-direction and independence as indicators of higher self-esteem. It could equally be that, with my own student group, failure to display these attributes could be related to previous experiences, lack of opportunities or an inability to comprehend the expectation of the tutor. It is also not only the behaviour of the participants but also the part played by others in prompting and interpreting these behaviours which is of interest to me.

Clearly, therefore, there are a number of threats to validity involved in the use of observation strategies. It is important to be aware of the potential effects of the research process itself, and of the researcher, on the behaviour under observation. Since I carried out the periods of observation when I would normally have been in the presence of the students involved, either in a teaching, or a supervisory, capacity, they took little notice of me. I did not notice any changes in their behaviour resulting from an awareness that this was one of my observation sessions. It is very possible that they did not fully understand the process and assumed I was doing preparation or marking at times when I was not involved in teaching. In addition, the students are very familiar with team teaching situations where one member of staff can be in a more 'observational' role.

Reactivity is more likely to be a potential source of error due to my status as a course tutor and to the ongoing desire of many students to act in a way which they believe will be pleasing to me. The objectives of my observational work have been chosen, not only to reflect the issues and claims made in the project but also to allow for the possibility of reactive effects. Friendship patterns, involving low-inference observations, are features of behaviour which involve less danger of error (Phillips, 1992). Coping strategies, however, pose more difficulties since an increased number of inferences are involved and since the students' behaviour is

likely to be modified, to a greater extent, due to my presence. This does not necessarily render the data invalid but highlights the need for triangulation in the form of reports from 'significant others' and, of course from the students themselves.

In relation to recording, I have chosen to make use of unstructured fieldnotes which are essentially descriptive and involve little inference. As mentioned in an earlier section, however, the social constructionist model recognises the problematic nature of 'fact' and 'neutral' reporting. It is my perception of a situation which I have chosen to observe which is on offer. The use of audio and/or video recording of events would have allowed me the opportunity to request other people's descriptions of events and would also have provided me with time and opportunity to review original recordings. However, this was impractical in terms of time and opportunity for me. In addition, the students, while used to me being around, would have been surprised to see me use such equipment and I suspect their behaviour would have reflected its presence. The potential for error, in transcription, would, of course, still have been present since this process too involves inference.

Finally, the potential for bias on my own part needs to be addressed. Given that I have known the students for a significant period of time, and have worked with them intensively, I already had many preconceived notions. For this reason, the course tutor agreed to act as a 'mentor' for me in relation to the observational work and to challenge any assumptions she felt might have been the result of bias. As the research progressed and I became familiar with theories such as Janis's (1983) Groupthink model, I began to realise the limitations in this approach. Clearly, the tutor and I shared a great many values, beliefs and assumptions. She was therefore unlikely to be aware of the potential biases. More than one mentor would have been required but I discovered this at a late stage in the process and opted to make increased use of the literature available as a means of prompting me to look again at the data.

Interviews

As with the observation process, there are a number of threats intrinsic to the use of this strategy. In quality-of-life interviews with people who have learning difficulties, Antaki (1999) suggests that researchers frequently edit questions to address limited cognitive ability and also redesign questions ‘sensitively’ in ways that lower the social and personal criteria for a high score. He, like Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks (1992), argues that the work that goes in the question and answer process is more complex than the official script and that this poses a threat to claims that questions are standardised. When the respondents are unable to understand complex questions the problem is exacerbated.

In using their own ‘unofficial’ talk to deal with difficult situations, the interviewers in Antaki’s (1999) study revealed a particular treatment of the respondent as being incompetent, not only mentally but also socially, as a person with reduced personal expectations. They redesigned questions, not only to lower the cognitive difficulty but also to lower the bar of what would count as a socially positive answer. I have been careful, in this study, not to assume that the students could not answer ‘proper’ or ‘normal’ questions. In choosing not to use standardised schedules, I have reduced the need to follow a script which might not be appropriate for the respondents and which might result in skewed findings. I have also, in this way, allowed more scope for discussions to be student-led.

The effect of the research process in interviewing is also very marked given that the participants are likely to remain aware of the process during discussions. Again, my status as tutor is significant, in relation particularly to the student interviews, although parents and carers too will have their own agendas and reasons for responding in particular ways. As Banyard and Grayson (1996) suggest:

“Mix the power of the experimenter with a large helping of subject compliance; add some desire to be a good subject; season with some active sense making, and

you have a recipe for a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 398).

This prompts us to ask a number of questions. Is it possible that, due to lack of interest or understanding, these students do not involve themselves in the sense making process? In that case, the responses will not be tarnished and demand characteristics will not emerge at all. Or is it more likely that the students may misread the situation and make the ‘wrong’ sense of the situation? Having made a sense of what they thought should be happening are they likely to respond in an inappropriate way or in a manner which does not reflect the sense made?

Data from all the interviewees must also be considered in the light of circumstances at the time and the place being described. Neisser (1981) suggests that memory, like attention, is vulnerable to skews. In fact, memory is in double jeopardy since, in addition to the initial skew in relation to what was perceived, there is the added potential for bias in recall. This tendency among people to describe events in terms of how they should have been leads Neisser to ask whether perhaps everyone’s memory is constructed, staged and self-centred. In this project, where the focus is on life events and the meanings attributed to them by a range of ‘players’, there is a heavy reliance on memory and on second and third hand accounts which may well have been distorted over time. Given that the students are likely to have struggled to make sense of situations in the first place, and that the passage of time has rendered their recollections somewhat tenuous, it could be argued that the threats to validity are insurmountable. I feel, however, that it is not the accuracy of recall in this work which is important. It is what the respondents choose to recall that will tell us about their priorities and motivations. In addition, their interpretations and perceptions now are also going to be very valid sources of information. Although their reactions in the past have influenced how they are today, I am more concerned with how they currently perceive their life experiences. This relates to the practical focus of the work. I cannot help them change or alter things that happened years ago but perhaps I can help them cope better with their lives now.

Finally, there is a need to recognise both the factors influencing me as the researcher and the students as subjects. My own value system, interest in the social model of disability and commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities will affect, not only the type of data I seek, but also the ways in which the raw material is then interpreted. There is a body of literature to suggest that the subjectivity of the researcher is a resource, rather than a problem, and that this should be addressed with regard to how s/he interacts with the material to produce a particular type of sense (Bannister *et al.*, 1994). I have tried to make explicit throughout this work my own preoccupations and concerns and the extent to which they might impact on the findings.

The students, as observers and recorders of their own lives, are unlikely to be impartial historians. It is more likely that they will engage in processes of fabrication and revision. This, according to Greenwald (1980), reflects the egocentricity which pervades mental life. Self-deceptions and biases, he argues, are so pervasive because they protect the integrity and maintain the self-image of the individual. When faced with a situation which is potentially stressful a defensive gap in reality is created. This lacuna diverts attention from the anxiety-evoking information and, in effect, produces a blind spot so that the self-concept is not threatened. At a later stage, painful memories can be repressed and avoided through the use of selective recall (Neisser, 1981). Given the students' experiences of exclusion, lack of achievement and powerlessness, it would seem likely that a range of strategies would come into play to protect themselves from the harsh realities of their situations. Awareness of this possibility is essential in the research process.

Process: Stage One

Selection of Students

All the students involved in the project are or have been enrolled at East Down Institute, a rural further education college serving a widespread community in an area of high unemployment and few leisure facilities. At college these students attend the Extension Studies programme, a modular, discrete course focused on the development of social/personal and employment skills. When I began my research, there were 19 adults attending on a full-time basis and a further six enrolled one or two days each week, while attending the local Resource Centre (previously the Adult Training Centre) on the remaining days.

All those involved had been registered with Social Services as 'mentally handicapped' or as having severe learning difficulties. This registration was effected when tests revealed an I.Q. of less than 70 and the adult was then entitled to funding for residential, day care or college provision. Eight students had Down's Syndrome and six were diagnosed as having an autistic spectrum disorder. Initially, college staff had been given the information, by Social Services staff, that two of these six had Asperger's syndrome. Clearly, given the severity of their learning disability, this was not the case. Another five students had syndromes of a much rarer nature which were associated with serious impairment in intellectual functioning and significant physical disabilities. In total 12 students had serious physical or sensory impairments in addition to the learning disability.

It is important to note that many diagnostic test instruments have been proved to be technically inadequate and have led to diagnoses of questionable validity (Raskind *et al.*, 1998) with resulting implications for the generalisation of results. Differences in learning disability definitions and subject criteria have made it difficult for me to identify other research with adults of similar ability and background to my own. This is, in part,

possibly due to the fact that we have a somewhat unique relationship with our local Social Services unit, Down Lisburn Trust. In order to include in Further Education, adults who would not previously have been considered due to the complexity of their disabilities, the Trust part funds the programme on an annual basis. A permanent working group negotiates and monitors the taught programme and selects the students who attend. Ages range from 17 to 49 and, while three students started the course in September 1997, many of the remainder had been attending the college for up to six years.

The first phase of the research was designed to produce a very tentative overview of student behaviours and the reaction of others to them. In addition, I wanted to place these behaviours in the context of life experiences and perceptions of the students themselves in order to attempt the 'sense-making' exercise. I therefore decided on the use of interviews with people who knew and worked with the students, life-story material compiled by the students themselves and data from personal awareness sessions in which the students took part.

Interviews

Interviews were held with the three tutors most involved with the student group, the three support staff and three volunteers from a local Dramability group which met one evening each week for a range of drama-related activities. This group was a voluntary organisation set up to bring disabled and non-disabled people together for social and cultural activities. The interviews were designed to elicit information about behaviours displayed by the students and assessed by the interviewees as problematic. I was also interested to learn more about how these people viewed the problem, particularly in the light of literature pertaining to the social creation of identity and the effects of culture on attitude and value systems.

The semi-structured interviews (see appendix 2) with staff took place in the college and lasted 20–40 minutes. In addition, Dramability volunteers were interviewed using the same format. Their interviews were shorter (15–25

minutes) and happened at the beginning or end of the drama class.

There were, at that time, 26 members in the Dramability group, of whom 18, 10 male and 8 female, had a severe learning disability. Only five of these 18 did not attend college and so there was a significant overlap in relation to the adults discussed by the range of interviewees. College staff involved in the interviews all had a minimum of five years' experience working with adults who have severe learning disabilities and all spent the greater part of their working week in the company of these students. The volunteers interviewed had all been involved with the Dramability group for at least three years but had much less contact with the students on a weekly basis. Clearly, given the small numbers and the relative brevity of the interviews, I could not hope to reach any real conclusions. The exercise, however, provided useful indicators in relation to future lines of inquiry. Specifically, themes of disempowerment, exclusion and learned helplessness were identified as requiring further exploration.

In the interviews, respondents were asked if they would count any individual with a severe learning disability among their friends. This was in order to further explore perceptions, particularly in relation to concepts of cultural identity and social equality. In retrospect, insufficient attention was given to the concept of friend and as a result the findings could not be viewed as particularly significant. The same themes were further developed in a later question which asked if the interviewee felt that s/he would be easily able to identify individuals with learning disabilities in situations where a number of people had come together socially. This latter question was also designed to raise issues regarding the potential for stereotyping and for lowered expectations. Again, these are complex notions and it must be recognised that acknowledging difference does not necessarily imply prejudice or stereotyping. The data produced must be viewed in this light. I also omitted to ask the respondents how they reacted to behaviours which they felt were troublesome although, clearly, this was a key element in the process. In stage two, it became a central concern in relation to interview and observation data.

I had hoped, in the next phase, to increase my involvement with the drama group. Unfortunately, due to staffing problems, the group has since ceased to meet and observation of college drama classes replaced the 'Dramability' experience in phase two.

Life Histories

With the agreement of the authors, I was able to review the content of life story books which were being compiled as part of an ongoing creative activity module. This involved 20 students, 11 female and 9 male, who, helped by parents and carers, were producing their own life histories. These students, aged from 17-49, were all registered with Social Services and had all had a lifetime's experience of special education without achieving any academic success. I used the material produced by these adults to help me in identifying life events and concerns which were being raised by the participants themselves and not by me as the researcher. In this way the stage two work emerged genuinely from the participants themselves.

There were, however, a number of difficulties inherent in this approach. Given that only five of the students involved were able to write, the remaining books had been produced either by parents/carers or by support staff from the college. In some cases it was clear that the 'helper' had restricted her or himself to transcribing what the student had said but in others the book had become the property of the 'writer' and the student was not aware of its contents. This was particularly evident in cases where well-meaning mothers had become involved. Although the presentation of the book was excellent, the content was of a totally factual nature and nowhere was I able to find evidence of the experiences having impacted in any way on the subject. This process was in itself possibly reflective of the relationships within these families and of the expectations held by some parents of their offspring.

In addition, the students were all at different stages in their books and some had only managed to get very little on paper. This meant that I was using data provided either by those who could write for themselves and had

therefore been able to progress faster or by those whose parents had become involved. An increased use of photographs, drawings and audio recordings would have lessened the reliance on literacy skills and this is a factor I was able to take into account in the design of my strategy for the next phase of the project. I was also able, in the next stage, to use the books as a basis for more in-depth discussion with a limited number of students.

On a more positive note, the life histories did provide some very valuable insights both into how some students had experienced events and people in their lives and into ways in which the 'system' has governed their experiences. Unlike interview situations, this activity was one in which the participants did not seem to feel they had to look for a right answer and, because it was about them and their lives, they had much more control over the process in college than would be usual for them. It would seem that the process involved in this case was just as important (if not more so) than the end product, particularly in relation to the development of key skills and the enhancement of self-esteem.

Personal Development Sessions

In addition, data, in the form of completed work sheets, observations and interview material, were collated from social and personal development sessions which were held on a weekly basis with the same students. These classes took place each Wednesday morning and lasted for two hours. They were staffed by two tutors (including myself) and three classroom assistants. A large multi-purpose room had been allocated and students worked in small groups of 4-5 with a member of staff. Each session began with an introduction by the tutor and an explanation and discussion about the focus of the morning's work. Worksheets were then distributed and completed by the students or, if necessary, by staff following the students' instructions. The groups were encouraged to share information and views and staff would actively promote this activity. At the end of the morning there was a group feedback to the whole class.

The data, alongside the memories and views recorded in the life story books,

were designed to provide some insight into the perceptions and self image of the students and into the possible effects of living false lives within a disabling culture. For the purposes of this study I chose to record, in detail, data from five sessions which I felt were particularly relevant to my research interest. These sessions were headed as follows:

- ◆ self-assessment
- ◆ what I look like
- ◆ my feelings about this week
- labels people have given me
- ◆ what I like and dislike about myself.

The first three sessions were chosen because they would produce data about the students' evaluations of their own appearance and behaviour. The fourth session would provide information about their awareness of feedback from other people while the final exercise would be telling in terms of the extent to which the students might use this feedback to modify their own self-concept. Clearly, this represents a somewhat 'crude' attempt but my work, at this stage, was essentially of a very tentative and exploratory nature and was more about getting a feel for the subject than producing outcomes and conclusions. To this end, the worksheets were a reasonably effective tool.

I have included, with permission from the students, a sample, completed sheet for each of the above sessions (appendix1). There are indications that, at times, the participants did not understand fully what was expected of them. In sheet 1c, for example, the student responded to the question 'What did I do well to-day?' by answering what he did each day without any assessment of performance. The suggestion is that he was either unable to evaluate his own behaviour or that he did not understand the question. In the self-assessment scale (1a) another student has given herself the highest rating on all items except the one related to the policeman. This was a very typical response and suggests that students may have had difficulties in discriminating between the levels of 'good'. It also suggests a particular interpretation of the third question about talking to policemen. The other possibility is, of course, that the majority of students do rate themselves extremely highly in relation to communication skills. I also collated the

responses (appendices 3-7) in order to assess similarities and differences in the way the sheets were completed and to see if, overall, patterns of perception could be identified.

As participant observer, too, I was often torn between the two roles and was not able to record as much data as I would have liked in the sessions. For instance, while working with one group, I would overhear a really interesting conversation in another group. This both distracted me from my own teaching and left me concerned that I had missed something important. I resolved not to attempt this dual role in the second stage of the project, although it was less time consuming.

In the course of my observations, I was also frequently aware of group leaders attempting to 'teach' the correct responses and rejecting answers which they felt were unacceptable. I overheard staff correcting information of a factual nature about the appearance of students and I was also aware of staff using sentences which began, "Do you not mean....." or "What about the time that.....".

Within the groups, it was often the case too that some students were content to simply copy the responses of others onto their own sheets or to reiterate what had just been said. For example, one male student announced he liked women with blue eyes. The female student beside him immediately said she liked women with blue eyes. The male student went on to say he loved football. The same female student quickly responded by saying that she loved football too. Further questioning revealed that she had never played or watched football in her life. These difficulties highlight the need for more individual work and for ongoing training and support for staff involved in this type of work. Sadly, in the current climate of financial and resource cutbacks this is unlikely to happen in my own college.

While the resulting data would be questionable in terms of both validity and reliability, the information generated, when viewed in the light of existing literature and other material produced during the study, was of great interest and did suggest a way forward for the following year's work. The response

of many students to this process was in itself illuminating although, again, it probably raised a great many more questions than it answered.

Process: Stage Two

In phase two of the project, I wanted to consider, in more depth, the most pertinent issues arising from the initial exploratory work. This would necessitate the selection of a smaller number of students who would be representative of the larger group and who would be willing to involve themselves in individual and group discussions about themselves and their lives. In addition, I needed their permission to observe and record their behaviour and to talk to 'significant others' in their lives. In this way, I would gain a variety of perspectives and would produce the necessary triangulation in the form of interviews and observations.

Work completed for part one of the project had suggested that in some cases, a lifetime of exclusion and disempowerment (contrary to other studies) seemed to have resulted in an inflated self-esteem and unrealistic identity. In part two, I was particularly interested in identifying the circumstances under which this occurs. I was no longer interested in understanding the social interaction of the group in terms of 'problem behaviours' but now viewed these behaviours as responses to a range of social stimuli and as an important means whereby the individual can function effectively (in their terms) on an ongoing basis. I was concerned to understand when and why these behaviours were exhibited by the individuals concerned and to identify the implications for teaching and learning.

Selection of Students

In relation to selecting a smaller number of students, the main criteria related to practical considerations such as accessibility, willingness to participate and parental agreement. In addition, I wanted to select a sample which would reflect the diversity of the whole student group on the course in terms of age, ability, background, sex and aspirations. Given that a

significant number of current students on the Extension Studies programme have Down's Syndrome, I did consider the option of selecting this group for more in-depth work. Data from stage one had suggested that the perception of the adult as 'eternal child' was especially prominent among these participants. I was also interested in the extent to which the 'visible' signs of the learning difficulty influenced (softened?) the attitudes and expectations of others. The reality for most teachers, however, is that they are faced with a wide range of abilities, interests and behaviours and that coping with the multi-faceted demands of the group is the reality of their work. Although a wide diversity would be found within the group of students with Down's Syndrome, I was aware of others from whom I felt I could learn a good deal and I opted therefore not to impose an unnecessary restriction on participation.

Initially, I spoke to the whole course, explaining again about the research and asking for volunteers. Twenty-three students were present and all but four wanted to be involved. I then went on to explain that I would only be able to meet with students on certain days and this ruled out five students who were not going to be available. I then organised a follow-up activity in which the remaining students were asked to complete a basic information sheet as part of an I.T. class. This sheet was to provide information related to age, sex, previous schools, living arrangements, hobbies and life goals (see appendix 9 for completed sample). The information supplied allowed me to select a representative sample of eight students ranging in age from 17 - 33 and reflecting diverse backgrounds, experiences and abilities. Initial data suggested that the older participants in this study had not 'moved on', either in terms of work or personal life and the age factor did not therefore appear significant. Six of the eight students had completed life story books during phase one of the project. The other two had not been involved in this activity but I was keen to include them in the second phase because they would extend the range of ability and background and they were particularly enthusiastic about being involved. The students not selected to participate accepted the information quite happily since, by this time, they had realised that the interviews would 'clash' with their much loved computer time. I subsequently compiled a spreadsheet (appendix 10) to include details of all

participants and show, at a glance, the diversity of the group.

Even at this preliminary stage, significant issues began to emerge. There were clear discrepancies between the information provided by some students for the information sheets and the reality of their situations. This was particularly evident in relation to the identification of previous schools attended and to hobbies and interests. When prompted, the students acknowledged omissions and 'exaggerations', but did not change, or agree for someone else to change, the sheets accordingly. In all cases, 'inaccuracies' in reporting related to painful or unpleasant experiences in the past lives of the students. Recording of these discrepancies for future analysis was, I think, of vital importance.

Group Meetings

From the stage one work, I had begun to identify life areas which were of particular significance both to the students and in relation to this project. Life story material had included many detailed accounts of educational experiences and had also highlighted critical and stressful experiences of rejection in a number of cases. Lack of power and choice had also emerged as salient themes in many books although awareness of these issues, and of the disability itself, appeared to vary. In addition, social experiences and hopes for the future appeared to be priority concerns for many students. These themes, around which I chose to structure the interviews, may be summarized as follows:

- ◆ Experience of schooling
- ◆ Lack of power/choice in daily life (awareness?)
- ◆ Friendships (quantity, quality)
- ◆ Social goals and value systems
- ◆ Exclusion (different lives)
- ◆ Disability awareness

I felt it might be less threatening for the students if the first series of interviews were carried out in a small group situation. Coming from a social work background, I was comfortable in the role of group facilitator and

suspected that there would be a significant advantage in pooling the student resources in the first instance. It also seemed to be an efficient method in terms of time and preparation.

With the permission of carers I scheduled a series of six group meetings to begin to explore issues related to the above. Given the distinct possibility of practical difficulties such as staff shortages or problems within the group impeding my progress, I timetabled the project to allow for eight sessions. This proved to be of great benefit since on one occasion we were 'evicted' from the room and on another we were subject to an inspection at short notice. All six interviews took place in the Adult Education Centre, where the Extension Studies programme is based, and were scheduled during normal college hours. Each lasted around 45 minutes and, in a practical sense, the students would not have noticed a great deal of difference between these sessions and some of the group work which forms part of their course. All interviews were taped, with the permission of the students, and subsequently transcribed.

A number of methodological issues emerged in the course of these initial interviews. First, some of the practical difficulties which arose were in themselves extremely significant. We arrived one day to find the room allocated to another class and when I queried this with the person responsible I was informed that since it was just Extension Studies he knew they could move somewhere else. The students were totally unperturbed while I struggled to hide my annoyance. On other occasions, we were disturbed by a seemingly endless succession of ancillary and teaching staff who thought nothing of wandering in to the room to attend to some small business of their own. Although this practice is ongoing, I had previously been relatively unaware of it and I am left wondering if there is an attitude among staff that, in some way, classes for students with learning difficulties are less important than mainstream provision. Both the students themselves, and the staff who teach them, are in some way less important than those working elsewhere in the college.

In relation to my own 'performance' as researcher I was surprised at how

hard I had to work in order to obtain the data I wanted. I had underestimated the amount of preparation time involved (each interview was planned in minute detail) and the difficulties inherent in facilitating such a diverse group. Before each session I was forced to prepare a number of different 'translations' for each question in order that all group members could understand and participate at their own level. On many occasions, I left the sessions feeling satisfied that I had remained objective and helpful throughout. However, in the course of playing back the tape for transcription I was shocked to detect notes of frustration, boredom and even anger in my voice. If I could discern these then I am sure the students could too. There is a valuable lesson in this for me in relation to my teaching generally!

The students overall were extremely keen to please and to give answers likely to be helpful to me although, as expected, some of the responses did not reflect the reality of their lives. In some cases, the level of understanding was an ongoing cause for concern and the need for triangulation and further exploratory work was evident. Some students showed a good deal of insight into the issues discussed while others addressed them on a more superficial level. Two of those involved have been diagnosed as possibly having an autistic spectrum disorder and again there were problems related specifically to this disability. Turn-taking did not come easily to them and there was frequently a need for me to make explicit the fact that someone in the group had used humour or sarcasm. This was not detected by these students. Lack of awareness about the impact of criticism on the person to whom it was directed was also problematic. At times, some of the individuals could be brutally honest and I was in a permanent 'policing' role in relation to predicting, blocking or softening comments which were likely to cause distress.

These challenges are probably reflective of the differing processes within the learning environment generally and highlight the complexities inherent in working with groups of this type. One student has a serious communication problem and this caused difficulties in most sessions. The other participants quickly became bored since they were unable to

understand his speech and his responses were invariably extremely long-winded and egocentric. He is not a popular member of the group and I was faced with the task of facilitating and acknowledging his contribution while, at the same time, holding the attention of the others. This involved repeating everything that was said for the rest to understand and attempting to involve them in questioning / clarifying his responses. I also felt ethically bound, because of his learning disability, to protect this student from verbal attacks from others who were becoming impatient with him. While I achieved some measure of success I would confess that, on some occasions, I did not have the motivation or energy to intervene and I would allow other students to interrupt and move the discussion on.

Despite the difficulties outlined above the group interviews did produce a great deal of important and illuminating data and were an enjoyable and educational experience for us all.

Individual Student Interviews

As a follow up to the group interviews I arranged to see each student twice on his/her own to work on the production of background information which would provide a much needed context in which to view their experiences and behaviours. These sessions were also important in relation to clarifying/developing comments made in the group setting and as a means of triangulation, particularly in respect of friends/ significant people in the students' lives. This topic had not, in my view, been adequately explored by the group, possibly because of the more 'intangible' nature of relationships in general. Again, the interviews took place during normal college hours and lasted 30-60 minutes each. The length of the interview reflected the attention span of the individual concerned.

Six of the eight students had completed life story books and I was able to use these as a basis for the interviews. They provided a great deal of factual information about each student and her/his past and, by asking the individuals concerned to pick out the most important bits for me, I was able to begin to identify priorities and individual value bases. The remaining two

students, who did not have life story books, were scheduled for longer interviews and had to compose their story 'from scratch'. Luckily, these students were two of the most academically capable in the group and could, therefore, complete the exercise fairly easily.

In relation to using the individual sessions to clarify issues arising from the group, a great deal of preparatory work was required before each interview. Individual comments from group interviews had to be tracked, recorded and matched against life story book material (where appropriate) for each student. I had not anticipated or planned for this level of activity and, as a result, was under significant pressure to have the preparation completed in time.

Observation

Observation sessions were arranged to focus on two main aspects of the students' behaviour: *friendship patterns/ social encounters* and 'less desirable' behaviours that might be viewed as coping strategies. These themes had again emerged from the stage one work. I arranged to monitor the students' behaviour over 10 break and lunch time sessions when they were in their base room eating and relaxing. I used a small notebook and recorded details of how each student interacted for 15 minute periods at a time. It proved an effective means of triangulation in terms of being able to verify, or question, 'claimed' friendships and social patterns. However, it was less useful in relation to providing data concerned with behaviour as coping mechanisms/responses. Some weeks into the process, I realised that this might be to do with the fact that the students are in a relatively stress free environment at break and lunch times in college. It would be rare for other students or staff to behave in a way that would be anxiety-producing for individuals at these times. I therefore decided to base my next series of observations in the classroom situation where it was more likely that the students would come under pressure in relation to aspects of their work and/or behaviour.

Over a six week period I observed the students in ten classes and recorded,

not only their behaviour, but that of teaching and ancillary staff present at the time. I spent 30 minutes in each class and lessons included literacy, numeracy, computers and drama. Given that all the students involved were in the same classes all week, the practicalities involved in observing them in a wide range of learning situations were not too daunting. The data produced was much more revealing in relation to how students coped socially during periods of stress and the additional time and effort spent was most worthwhile. A summary of student behaviour indicating frequency and type of contact with others was compiled (appendix 8). I feel however that the observation work was the weakest part of the research strategy. I spent a lot of time observing but seeing little and this was most frustrating. Only towards the end of the project, when the planned observations were complete, did I begin to make real discoveries. I was still around a great deal, as part of the teaching team, and was open to noticing things at any time. It was as if, earlier, I had only allowed myself to observe during the allocated periods on the basis that this was the disciplined and correct approach. I suspect many opportunities were missed and that a better approach would have been to keep a log book of observations on an on-going basis, not restricted to times or places.

Interviews with Significant Others

I identified certain individuals as being main 'players' in relation to this project and planned to carry out individual interviews with each of them. They included college staff primarily concerned with the students ie. the course tutor, basic skills tutor and two care assistants, the parents/carers and work placement supervisors, as appropriate. I was not optimistic about getting full interviews with all the parents since, in some cases, they were at work all day and lived some distance from the college. In these cases, my own interviews had to be on the same days as the student reviews, in which case they were of shorter duration and there was the possibility of 'overkill' with the families involved. To counteract these threats it was important to select the most important issues in advance and to keep the sessions very focused.

I intended to aim for a high level of commonality in relation to this series of interviews so that tensions and disparities between respondents would become apparent. The main areas for discussion had been selected to link closely with the student interviews and included:

- ◆ friendships / social life of the student
- ◆ identification / interpretation of behaviours
- ◆ responses, conceptual and practical to behaviours
- ◆ perceived level of success achieved by the student.

Where possible, I also used interviews with the parents as a means of cross-checking information given to me by the students in interviews and in the life story books. I met once with the parents of all eight students and each meeting lasted approximately 30 minutes.

I was able to identify times during their normal working week when the four college staff could meet with me to discuss the themes outlined above. Each interview lasted around one hour and was focused on the issues as they affected each of the students involved. The staff were willing to be involved and provided extremely frank responses in relation to individual participants.

In relation to the placement supervisors, I had the additional problem that the course tutor was involved in research of her own related to work experience and had already interviewed the individuals with whom I wanted to speak. I considered using the data which she had collated but there were a number of methodological concerns which prevented me from doing so. I opted instead to postpone my own interviews for as long as possible and to keep them as short and concise as I could. With this promise two of the three supervisors agreed to a second 30 minute interview with me although I was disappointed in the quality and quantity of data produced. I suspect this is not unrelated to weaknesses in my own interview schedule. I think now that it needed to be more specific and perhaps should have been sent, in advance, to the interviewees. The third supervisor unfortunately had moved to another job and was unavailable for interview.

In the next section, when we look at the data obtained from these interviews, a number of interesting similarities and discrepancies emerge. These, I believe, are important in terms of increasing our understanding of the interactive processes affecting people with learning difficulties.

CHAPTER FOUR : FINDINGS

Stage One Data

Self-perceptions

The following data were obtained from the personal development sessions recorded. As highlighted in chapter three, the worksheets used were designed as course materials for use by the students and not as research tools. On their own, therefore, the data obtained in these sessions would be of very limited value. However, problems and issues were suggested and the findings were extremely helpful in terms of signposting possible avenues of investigation. Given that I was anxious to take, as my starting point, the experiences and perceptions of the students, and not existing theory or other related research, this step was essential in the overall process.

On the self assessment rating scale (appendix 3) completed by 24 students, six rated themselves as 'very good' on eight or more statements. Ten students rated themselves 'quite' or 'very good' on all statements. This was despite the fact that the majority (16) had been involved in a communications assessment activity the previous day and all except four had been deemed 'not competent'. This feedback had been given clearly and understanding of it had been ascertained by the tutor involved.

In the personal appearance activity (appendix 4) six students had been unable to specify the colour of their hair and/or eyes. This was surprising given that similar exercises had been done on numerous occasions. One brown haired, green eyed, girl who is currently attending a dietician because of her weight problem, insisted she was slim 'like a super model' and had blond hair and blue eyes.

In the 'Feelings about the week' session (appendix 5) eight out of ten

students who completed the worksheet could not think of anything they did not do well during the past week. Formative, ongoing assessments are a feature of the programme and, in tutorials the previous day, a number of students had been challenged about their failure to achieve specific objectives.

In the session on labels which had been given, the students had been able to identify a number of positive and negative statements which had been used about them (appendix 6). However, in the subsequent session on things they liked and disliked about themselves (appendix 7) only four of the 17 students involved were able to identify something about themselves which they did not like.

Other Perspectives

These data were obtained in interviews with college staff and volunteers at the Dramability group.

Prior to meeting the students, all but one of the interviewees expressed feelings of fear, concern, anxiety or even panic, which was not surprising given the segregated lives which people with severe learning difficulties lead.

Despite, in some cases, very lengthy contact, seven of the nine interviewees said they did not view any of the adults concerned as friends because they were too different. The remaining two qualified the use of the term 'friend'.

"No, they're different from us. I like some of them want to help ...like, I feel motherly towards them but as a friend, no. You can't have proper conversations with them." (volunteer)

"You need to be on the same wavelength. You expect your friends to give you advice but they can't. Or you wouldn't go out for a drinkin' session with any of them, the normal things people do. Anyway people would just

say you're taking advantage." (staff)

All of the interviewees were very readily able to identify a number of behaviours which they found irritating or undesirable. These could be roughly classified as follows:

- ◆ Intrusive behaviours i.e. crowding, hugging, butting in.
- ◆ Mannerisms
- ◆ Inability to have a normal conversation
- ◆ Passivity
- ◆ Self-obsession

"They go on and on about themselves. They ask you about yourself but they don't listen. They don't get that a conversation begins and ends. And the hugging!"
(volunteer)

"It's the things they talk about, their birthdays. They hover over you and say hello a dozen times." (staff)

In relation to behaviours which were viewed positively, five interviewees commented that interaction with this group had a 'feel good' factor. Other comments were made in relation to the students' naiveté and humour and there was a strong suggestion that working with this group boosted the self-esteem of staff and volunteers because it was viewed as a worthwhile activity.

"No matter what, they'll laugh and agree with you. You can never get it wrong. They don't realise when you're bored. I'm very comfortable and at ease with them."
(staff)

"A lot of them are very nice people and so anxious to please. They never hold grudges and there's a naivete about a lot of them which is very appealing." (staff)

"They're straightforward, no hidden agendas. They enjoy everything they do." (volunteer)

The interviewees explained many of the behaviours in terms of the students' identity as special, intervention by parents / carers, attention seeking activities and the group mentality:

"They're used to being seen as special, getting medals for not doing a lot. They're not really interested in me as a person." (volunteer)

"It's down to family background. No-one speaks to them at home. They're not used to being involved." (college staff)

"I see them as spoiled children, all wanting your attention, all spoiled by their families and people in the street. They know somebody will always bail them out. They use their status. Sometimes they want to be normal but they won't do anything about it. The parents are overpowering. Parents turn them into what they want and they go along with it. They settle into their own wee fantasy world. They live their lives in a crowd and it's me, me, me." (college staff)

When asked if they thought they could identify people with learning difficulties in a social setting, six interviewees said they would be able to because of the nuisance behaviours and the way that many of these adults dress. In terms of what needs to happen, eight interviewees stressed the need for more integration and from a much earlier age. In addition it was suggested that these people should not be treated as special ie. as worthy of more care/respect than their non-disabled peers, that training for all sections of the community was desirable and that prejudice was an issue.

"They need to mix more out of their groups, experience normal conversations, not to be made to feel so special. It comes down to poor communication skills." (volunteer)

Personal Histories

Lack of power and choice in their own lives was a theme which was echoed over and over again in the life story books. The role played by parents, other family and professionals in creating and maintaining a sense of futility was also highlighted.

“I do not know my date of birth.” (Dan, 38).

“I hated living in M.....I didn’t like the dinner and I was made to eat it. I ran away once.” (Kevin, 32).

“When my mummy died I wanted to go to my mummy’s funeral. On the day of the funeral we had to stay at home because they said we were too young. We felt awful.” (Meg, 46).

“I ran away from the children’s home. The staff were looking out for me. I came back myself on the school bus.....I wet the bed and had measles.” (Nan, 40).

“when I left school I had to go and sign on the dotted line and we had a whole lot of problems with it and trouble and it was very difficult to get through to those people and the questions that you got from them were hard to find an answer to them. It was just like talking to a brick wall.....and we could not go looking for work or to the potatoes so I was fed up sitting about the house with nothing to do.” (Mark, 29).

Some students had had much happier experiences. I was able to identify seven books which had been carefully compiled, with the help of parents, to include numerous photographs, medals and rosettes for horseriding. The students were clearly extremely proud of their work and keen to talk to me about its contents. These students did not identify, in their personal histories, any issues related to disability or its effects. In four cases, the student’s hope for the future was that things would stay the same.

In nine instances, students referred in their books to experiences of rejection

and/or humiliation at school and to on-going difficulties in their personal lives. These issues were further explored in stage two of the project and examples of this material are included in the next section.

Stage Two Data: part one

These data were obtained from interviews with the eight students, parents/carers, college staff and placement supervisors where appropriate. The first part includes information related to individual students and is organised under the headings of: student perspective and other perspectives. The themes of educational experience, social life, personal characteristics and future goals are explored in each case.

Bernadette

Bernadette is 19 years old and lives at home with her mother and ten year old brother.

Bernadette's perception of her educational experience

"I went into the secondary end of the school and when I went into form two I started working harder and I had to help everybody with their work. I still never had any friends and nobody liked me. They were always hitting me. I never had any friends in that school."

"I don't really like being in the class that I am in because people started calling me handicapped. I would rather be at work than at college but I like the college as well."

..... her social life

"When I became 16 I wanted to start going out at nights. I wanted to go to discos, parties, nightclubs and pubs. Every night my mummy and I had rows because I wanted to start going out at nights and I was never allowed."

"I need to start getting out and meeting people and making new friends. Downpatrick is terrible. It hasn't got the things and places we are interested in and where we could go. These are the sort of things that other adults do that I don't do: discos, parties, out to meet their friends, night

clubs, out on dates and enjoying themselves. I can't do any of that because I have no-one to go out with and I am epileptic and have Autism.”

..... herself

“In some ways I like being myself but in most ways I don't like being myself. What I do like about being me is that I go to East Down Institute and I have made new friends there. I like living in the estate. I have a friend who lives next door and in the summer I love going outside to meet all my friends in front of my house on the football pitch.”

“What I don't like about myself is, I hate being a person who is epileptic and has to take tablets. When I turned 17 I was going to apply for my driving test but my mummy wouldn't let me. The doctor said I am not allowed to drive because I am epileptic. That upset me. On a Friday night I hate sitting at home while all my friends are at the discos down the street. I go to my friend Julie's house instead because she is always looking for a friend to sit with.”

..... goals for the future

“When I finish college I would like to train and get a job as a secretary. If that doesn't work out I would then train for health and fitness. If I did start going out with my friends to different places this will change my life completely. It will turn my life around and make my life really happy. I will not have a sad life anymore.”

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“At the minute the only thing that is worrying me is my future. I don't know what is going to happen. I don't know if I am going to get a job as a secretary or not. I don't know if my life is ever going to change. I hope I can move out and get a house on my own. I don't want to live with my mummy and daddy for ever.”

Other perspectives on Bernadette's educational experience

Bernadette's mother said her daughter had had a number of problems at school:

"She hated K. school. We had a terrible time. St. M. was better although they had to let her out ten minutes before the rest of the pupils so she could run home without people seeing her in her uniform. She hated wearing it."

..... Bernadette's social life

Staff responses to Bernadette were fairly uniform:

"She has no particular friends. You might say Martina but Bernadette sees herself as Martina's boss".

"She talks to everybody but she's friendly with nobody."

Bernadette's mother agreed:

"The social worker is trying to get someone to befriend her, go out to things with her. She has my head away!"

The placement supervisor also agreed:

"The staff tried their best to get her to mix in but it was useless."

.....Bernadette herself

In terms of Bernadette's behaviour, the college staff identified a number of 'problems':

"She's very demanding and a lot of her behaviour is socially inappropriate. She comes across as being very rude. She sets herself apart from the other students."

"She's likeable but very demanding. She interrupts constantly and she only ever talks about herself. Her social skills need work."

"She gets something on her mind and she's obsessional. She'll never change and she has no interest in other people."

Again her mother was in agreement:

“She has progressed academically but, socially, no. I’m at my wits end. She’s constantly wanting out, wanting to be like the other ones her age. She doesn’t understand.”

The placement supervisor too was negative:

“She didn’t even listen to what we wanted her to do. She got bored really quickly. I don’t know why she came here in the first place.”

In relation to trying to understand and respond to these behaviours there were mixed opinions among the staff:

“I think it’s to do with her condition. I just change the conversation when I’m getting nowhere. It’s not worth it.”

“Maybe, it’s to do with her past experiences or her home life. I always ask her what she’s doing wrong. Most times she can tell me. She knows in her head but she can’t stop for some reason. I try to give her praise, to balance the telling offs.”

“It’s maybe related to some condition, or maybe it’s to do with her being kept down at home. I’m always firm with her, challenge her. It works, but only till the next time.”

Bernadette’s mother also attributed the difficulties to her ‘condition’:

“I know there is something wrong with her but I don’t think other people are prepared to give her a chance. Nobody’s really interested in helping. I know at times I make it worse when I threaten her with things but she just pushes too far.”

..... goals for the future

While Bernadette has many hopes for the future the college staff were not so sure:

“I can’t see her progressing much beyond this course. I’m not sure she’ll cope in mainstream. She’ll never get a job because she’s so demanding.”

“I think work placement or sheltered employment would be the most she could hope for. I wish she could get a job because she tries so hard.”

Bernadette’s mother suggested that a job was highly desirable:

“If employers would give her a chance to prove herself. They should make allowances for somebody like her. She needs a job so she can mix with other people and build up her confidence.”

The placement supervisor felt differently:

“That girl doesn’t want to work. I don’t know where you could put her.”

Ivan

Ivan is a 32 year old man who lives at home with his mother. His life story was fairly short but I think the following extracts provide some insight into who he is and what he wants out of life:

Ivan’s perception of his education

“When I was six I went to R. primary school. I did not like it because people were fighting. When I was nine years old I went to Cookstown primary school and I liked this school. I had friends there called Samuel and Mandy. When I was 13 I was at Cookstown High School and I liked it there and I had some friends at the High School. I worked hard there as well and I enjoyed it very much. When I was 16 years old I went to Magherafelt school and I worked hard at making things and I got some friends there and I enjoyed it.”

..... his social life

“I am at the work placement washing cars and I let them dry first. Then I vacuum the cars out really clean for the customers to buy. After I use the cleaner I put it away in a place where it lives and I get the wax and cloth for the polishing. Roy helps me to polish them really shiny for

the customers to buy. I love to be at work placement very, very much. Sometimes I interrupt Paul when he is on the phone with somebody who would like to buy a car. It is very important and I will not interrupt ever again.”

..... himself

“I live with my mother at home. My father died in 1991. I had one brother and two sisters. They live in England. I am the youngest in the family. I have nightmares about why Lucy and Niall have moved to Lancaster.”

“I am not allowed to go out on my own because of my tablets. That's why I'm not allowed to go out on the road by myself. I find some words very hard to spell and write. Once I leave college I hope to get another job in a garage at another work placement but I will still be working at Paul's in the meantime. I am so worried about me taking a turn like feeling to have a fit and I hope I will be feeling better. My worries are that I wouldn't get a job in a garage but I will get a job in a garage, in the tyre business, so I will and I will not worry about it.”

..... goals for the future

“I would like to change my life because I would like to work in a garage with tyres very much. I would change my life as an adult because I would love to be kissed by my friend Samantha at Cookstown. I got a Christmas present and I was glad with that and I was pleased as well.”

Other perspectives on Ivan's educational experience

Ivan's mother could not remember any problems at school:

“I think he would be quite happy anywhere. He gets very stressed when he can't cope with the work. That's the only problem.”

..... Ivan's social life

College staff view Ivan as an exceptionally isolated student. All four said he had no friends at all while two added that ‘he latches on to people.’

Ivan's mother confirmed that he did not socialise with friends:

"It's to do with where we live. It's so isolated. There is only one other house and it's nearly half a mile away. We do have a family friend we visit often and Ivan loves that."

The placement supervisor agreed:

"He would never take time to socialise. He works constantly. The others are great with him. They just let him get on with it. He only really comes to me when he wants something."

..... Ivan himself

A number of 'problem' behaviours were identified by college staff:

"He's endless. He's at people all the time."

"He gets so stressed and then it's a nightmare. He rhymes and rhymes, and interrupts constantly. He can lose his temper too."

"He's very greedy, always wanting two dinners, and that staring!"

Ivan's mother did not agree:

"It's all just part of growing up. In many ways Ivan is just at the teenage stage, wanting to find out about things. He does worry when he's not sure about his work though."

The placement supervisor was very positive:

"I was expecting Ivan to be so much worse. We have to be organised and have plenty of work for him because he can't cope if he has to wait. He puts the rest of them here to shame. He works so hard. Sometimes he is odd but it's no big deal. Nobody here bothers."

In terms of explaining Ivan's behaviour, all four staff attributed it to his syndrome/condition although no-one was sure what it was.

"I'm firm with him, tell him to wait."

"I stand up to him. I won't let him intimidate me."

His mother too felt it was down to his disability but has never been told what that disability is. *In terms of the future she is optimistic:*

"He has done so well in his work placement. I hope he'll get a job in a garage nearer home. The problem is, it'll probably affect his benefits. If Ivan got wages I'd never see any of it. I'm not sure I'd want to go down that road."

The staff were not so sure:

"He doesn't even cope with college. Placement opportunities are limited because of his behaviour and where he lives."

Sandra

Sandra is a 34 year old woman who lives at home with her mother and father. She attended a school for children with moderate learning difficulties before being transferred to a school for those with severe learning disabilities. In her life story she omitted to include any reference to her first school although in later interviews she talked about her unhappiness at having to leave it.

Sandra's perception of her education

"First, I love being the student and being able to mix in. I love coming through the door every day."

"I have tried the working. I did work with Eileen for a good while but I didn't like going on the phone and I heard people shouting across the phone. I moved to working with Mary and all I had to do was keep the records of every student and keep them up to date. I did a bit of filing as well as photocopying. I moved on to Dorothy at reception and I got bullied when other students jumped in behind me trying to get to the photocopier before me and that wasn't fair.

After that I moved to another piece of action but this time

it was for real. I kept on working as hard as anything. I moved on again to work in Library Headquarters. I had a great time there and I worked so hard they kept me moving. I didn't know where to stop. That's when I moved to work under the word 'Pathway'. That only confused me more. I didn't know where to begin from. I also worked in the Graphics shop in Downpatrick and I was stuck working away with the two brothers there and then I got the word I was being transferred back to the college."

..... her social life

"I would like to go out more at nights. I would not go with strangers. I would definitely go with a wee group with all of my friends. We could go to see many concerts and live orchestras. That will be enjoyable."

..... herself

"I had a great life. I was a steady and quiet person but my mother and father brought me up. I'm glad they did that."

"My friend lives in the Residential, you see, and they only have to be following instructions and rules but my friend told me herself it looks like a prison. She means a prison with no bars but they have stairs and very nice rooms. At any time, if they want to go out for a walk or a bit of shopping they would have to say to the member of staff if they would let them go. I entertain them all on the piano because I can play for them."

"I was born with Downs Syndrome and it did not stop me from learning many things, like passing music exams with the Trinity College London. I am amazed at the way my mother and father brought me up and help me so much. I thought to myself they were so good to me. Sometimes I get embarrassed when I am with other people in case I make a mistake in my daily life. I might be very stuck

handling money. I mean when I am with other people that I am working with I like to get it right instead of wrong. If I had any difficulties it would be only if I had any questions about my work. I might not know the answers. I get embarrassed when I am asked a lot of questions at one time because I cannot think too fast. I would like time to think of an answer. I would be scared if I had to travel on a bus by myself in case there are crowds of rough people on it. When I find myself in trouble my parents advise me what to do. When I cannot solve it for myself I do piano lessons to help me think better. It also helps my stiff fingers.”

..... goals for the future

“I want to travel and see the world and be a musician.”

Other perspectives on Sandra’s educational experience

Sandra’s father told me:

“She was doing very well but that other school didn’t want her because of the Down’s, you know. She did well enough at the special school. We worked with her at home.”

..... Sandra’s social life

College staff were all agreed that Sandra had no friends on the course and only the one outside. Her mother confirmed this:

“She and Cathy have been friends since nursery school. They’re good company for each other although Sandra would boss Cathy a bit.”

..... Sandra herself

In terms of Sandra’s behaviour, her mother was fairly critical:

“I suppose she’s told you she’s running the whole house. She thinks we’d never survive without her. She bosses her daddy all the time and he goes along with it. She doesn’t listen to a word I say and she can be so lazy. She just lives for the drama each week. That’s all we hear about.”

Staff responses were mixed:

“She’s always keen to please and she works so hard in the classes she likes. She’s so disorganised it’s unbelievable and she has no interest in work placement. She pretends she’s better than she is and she would never admit she can’t do something. That gets her into so much trouble.”

“She models herself on the teaching staff. She wouldn’t be helpful to the other students.”

In terms of attributing causes for Sandra’s behaviour, the staff did agree:

“She doesn’t see herself like the rest. She sees herself as normal.”

“I think her parents have put it into her that she’s normal.

She appears more confident than she really is.”

..... goals for the future

Again, in terms of her future, staff responses were fairly uniform:

“She could work but she wouldn’t want to.”

“Day care will be the long term answer. She’s getting older and will stay at college as long as she can.”

Sandra’s mother said simply:

“We just want her to be happy. Sandra doesn’t think work is glamorous enough. I don’t know about the future.”

Martina

Martina is a twenty three year old woman who lives at home with her parents, brother and two sisters.

Martina’s perception of her education

“I was at St. B. primary school from five years old till 11 years old. The teachers used to tie my hands behind my back to stop me writing with my left hand. I didn’t like it. I went to the High School but I didn’t like it there. They didn’t treat me right. Then I went to the special school and I was in the choir. My friends were Mark and Aidan. I sometimes did not like having to do too much homework. I liked this school very much.”

“The day I left school I felt sad and scared. I didn't know where I was going or what people I would meet. I was afraid the staff at college would shout at me.”

..... her social life

“The people who matter in my life are my parents and my sisters and brother, also I like my nephews and nieces. I also think that my teachers matter as they have helped me with things I have learned. I have made friends with three people in my class. I also am friends with another girl called Kerry. She once invited me to her birthday party when she was at school.”

..... herself

“I am happy about the way I manage doing what I have done because, being epileptic, it has not been easy. I missed a whole lot of school. I would like to work like other people but employers are very worried about employing people with my illness.”

“I have difficulty in reading because sometimes I can't remember the words I have been put over. The main thing is because I suffer from epilepsy. I have to remember to take my tablets at the proper times. This is to make sure I don't take any seizures which might hurt myself. The other thing I find hard sometimes is being able to read some signs when we are out and about the town.”

“I get worried sometimes when I'm crossing the road and the traffic is very thick and fast down the street. The other thing that worries me is I will sometimes forget what I have to do. I get worried if I am away from home and have to phone home to make sure everything is all right.”

..... goals for the future

“I would like to be able to go out and enjoy myself but I

know that I have to take things easy. The other thing I hope to be able to do is to be able to get a job and meet people my own age. One of my dreams was to visit Old Trafford, the home of Manchester United. The local supporters club and the local dart team ran a competition to raise the money for me and daddy to do this. The other dream I have is to meet Boyzone or someone else famous. I'd like to get married and have a white wedding and a fancy car. I would like to go to Spain for my honeymoon. The boy I marry would have to have loads of money. If I got married I would like four children, two boys and two girls."

Other perspectives on Martina's educational experience

According to Martina's parents:

"They really bullied her at the secondary school. It was a disgrace. K. was far better. They were really good to her. No, she needs to be in places like that."

..... Martina's social life

The college staff again saw this student as something of a loner:

"She works with Bernadette but I wouldn't say they were friends."

"No female friends. She has a thing about some of the males in the group."

Martina's parents were more positive:

"Everybody likes Martina. Sure, she's a great girl."

..... Martina herself

The staff identified some 'undesirable' behaviours:

"She stares all the time, really blank looking."

"She can be lazy. She'll let other people do the things."

However, in contrast to some of the other students, Martina was also viewed very positively by some staff:

"She always smiles and she's really co-operative. She's a very likeable girl."

"I like her, who wouldn't? She's very serious about everything."

Her parents were equally positive:

"She's a good girl. It's such a pity about her epilepsy. It's going to stop her doing everything. She can't read at all because of it."

In terms of explaining her behaviour, college staff had differing views:

"Her sisters do it all for her at home so why should she bother?"

"I think it's the medication. She doesn't understand half the time."

..... goals for the future

In terms of the future Martina's parents could not foresee her ever working:

"No, with her epilepsy and all, it's not on the cards. We've no idea what she'll do. She loves the college."

Staff, too, had reservations:

"I'd love to see her get a job but we haven't even been able to put her on placement. I think day care in the longer term."

John

John is a 34 year old man who lives in a residential unit for adults with severe learning difficulties. His parents live about 15 miles away. He has a serious speech impediment in addition to his learning disability.

John's perception of his education

"My mum heard about the school in Holywood, in Northern Ireland. My parents left me behind. My mum and dad were very sad. I was crying a lot. My parents took me back home. Then I came back a second time and I enjoyed myself with all my friends. I moved to

Glencraig when I was six years old. I lived in a big house with a housemother and housefather. When I was small I went to kindergarden with my small, little friends and then I went to junior school. When I was about 15 I became a senior and helped to look after the younger children because I was grown up then.”

..... his social life

“When I was young I went on holiday with my parents. They picked me up to take me home from school. It was a longer holiday for me. That was a good year. When I was grown up I had no holiday while I was at work. All the young children went home with their parents. We had to look after the land.”

“I had a first girlfriend called Diane and she was very nice and kind and she liked to work with me. That’s why I love her. I was very happy when I met her and I felt very pleased. Then, out of the blue, she told me she was going away. I was very unhappy when she told me. I started to cry and I told her, “Please don’t go. I want you to stay with me.”

“I enjoy myself in the residential. I have some friends and I enjoy going out with them sometimes. I don’t like some of my friends going off to find a boyfriend. I don’t mind that but, a week later, they come back and tell me they are getting engaged without telling me. It makes me jealous.”

“I do like to meet up with some of my friends to have great fun together, like Danny and I are the best friends for a long time. Just Bette and Janette and I are good friends for a long time. Angela, Martina, Bernadette and myself are friends because we are fans of Manchester United. I did have a girlfriend, called Helen Craig. I met her over 26 years ago. That’s why I love her.”

..... himself

“I have to look after my parents because they look after me. I help them to work in the garden and even go out to the shop and help my mum to buy food for us. My parents live in B. and I am their son.”

“It is hard to find someone to talk to. It’s not very easy sometimes. Something that makes me worry at night that I don’t know. It’s hard to find out. It makes me upset at times. Would somebody like to help me to find a friend?”

.....goals for the future

“I would go to London and get a flat and work as a reporter.”

Other perspectives on John’s educational experience

According to John’s father:

“We were abroad for much of the time, of course, but he’s a great chap and loved the independence. He still does. He has done remarkably well.”

..... John’s social life

Given that John laid such emphasis on friendships and that he named many of the tutors as being his best friends, I was particularly surprised by the following responses from the staff:

“He doesn’t mix, never talks to anybody.”

“He has no friends here.”

“I can’t think of anyone he is friendly with.”

His keyworker in the unit confirmed that it was the same at home:

“He just goes to his room but that’s not a problem. He needs his space when he has been mixing with people all day.”

His father agreed:

“He loves spending time with me. He’s happy to see our friends coming to the house but I suppose I never see him

mixing outside. I probably should make more time for him.”

.....John himself

In response to questioning about John’s behaviour, college staff had a lot to say:

“He’s a funny mixture. On one hand, he’s always trying to ingratiate himself with staff but, on the other, he can be very unco-operative. He’s always last to do everything and it’s all those long monologues.”

“I think he’s quite arrogant. He’s always a bit aloof and I wouldn’t trust him.”

“He thinks he’s really good at everything but he’s not.”

John’s keyworker at the residential unit did not agree:

“There are no problems with him at home. He’s very settled and happy with us.”

Neither did John’s father:

“He loves being at college and he has come on so well. The only problem he has is his concentration span. It’s very short. John is a very complex character. He’s independent and well travelled. He loves the idea of being a student and I wouldn’t want that taken away from him.”

The keyworker highlighted the importance of college attendance too:

“He can’t stay at college for ever but he doesn’t want daycare. That would be too distressing for him.”

In relation to John’s problems at college, this worker had his own idea:

“He’s maybe not getting the support and help he needs at college. We have no problems here.”

College staff had a different view:

“I think it’s his home life, definitely. I do praise him when he does well but that’s not very often. It’s easier in drama.”

“I give him attention but he always wants more.”

“Possibly something to do with residential care. He’s obsessed with the desire to be normal. Maybe he thinks if he was normal he would be living at home.”

..... goals for the future

The staff were unanimous that daycare was the only option for John in future. His father was more optimistic:

“If he had the right support, John could do well in a job. We’re hoping they’ll give him another try on the employment scheme.”

Niamh

Niamh is a young woman, aged 22, who lives at home with her parents and younger sister. She has a serious mobility problem in addition to her learning disability.

Niamh’s perception of her education

“When I was five I went to primary school in Castlewellan. I wore a navy pinafore, a navy cardigan and a striped tie. My teacher taught me to read. When I was twelve I went to the secondary school. I wanted to leave there because I didn’t like some of the staff shouting at me for no reason. When I was 16 it was time to go to further education. I went to Jobskills Access when I went to the tech. I went to work in the I.T.O. and the classroom assistant went with me. Leo drove me there. Then I got to work in a clothes shop. Joan took me to work up there in her car. Leo drove me to and from college.”

.....her social life

“I would like to have my own room. I would like to get on better with my sister, going out to discos and meeting her friends from school. I would have liked to go to Belfast with two of my friends. I would prefer it if my parents were not there (in Belfast).”

“I want to be happy and healthy. I would like to be able to

drive. I hope to lose some weight so I can get around better and faster. I would like to get out more with my friends to the pub and places like that. I hate being in the house all the time I never get to go out anywhere with some of my friends.”

..... herself

“I have Rubenstein Tabis syndrome. I find walking far distances hard to do. I find losing weight harder. I always have an orange badge to park somewhere near the places. I always have to park in the Disabled parking spaces if I am in the car out anywhere. I cannot have a shower because I have trouble with balancing. They are going to put a bench in for me. I like to be helpful all the time. I really get frustrated because I can't do anything for myself. I would like to do more things for myself.”

..... goals for the future

“ I would like to get a job as a reporter. I would like something that I can do. I could get a pen and a notepad so that I can write things down, report on things. If that did not work I want to get a job in an office because I could sit down at a desk.”

Other perspectives on Niamh's educational experience

Niamh's mother had no complaints about her experience of school:

“They were great in C. school. She got a lot of help although I think she had more problems as she got older. She didn't really mix with any of the children.”

..... Niamh's social life

When asked about Niamh's social activities, the staff and Niamh's mother all identified one other student on the course as being her only friend. They telephone and meet up socially outside college. Her tutor told me:

“It's a really strange relationship. They practically ignore each other all day in college but then they're on the phone every evening. Niamh would tend to get really cross with

Rosalind and tells her off frequently.”

..... Niamh herself

In terms of Niamh’s behaviour, the staff presented a uniform response:

“She’s very bad-tempered and likes to get her own way.”

“She’s very huffy, cries easily.”

“Stubborn. She can be very cross.”

Niamh’s mother used all the same terms in relation to her daughter:

“She can be a real madam. She’s spoiled rotten.”

College staff agreed that Niamh’s behaviour related to how she had been brought up at home. In addition, there was some question around whether it was to do with her syndrome:

“It’s maybe to do with her condition but I think they have her spoiled at home. She must get her own way all the time.”

.....goals for the future

In relation to Niamh’s future, there was again commonality between the responses of college staff and those of her parents. According to one tutor:

“Her mobility is so poor. I can’t see her ever managing a work placement, never mind a job. Employment is not an option.”

Jim

Jim is a 28 year old man who lives with his elderly parents. He has a visual impairment and mobility problems in addition to his learning disability. Two months ago he left the college. According to his mother, there was a problem but he wouldn’t say what it was.

Jim’s perception of his education

“I was born on the 31st May 1972 in hospital in Downpatrick. I have lived in K. all my life. I started the local primary school when I was four and I had a uniform and everything. I liked it there but then they noticed I

wasn't able for to keep up. I was keeping the whole class back. They decided on K. school for me. I had to get up at seven every morning. I was the first picked up because the driver lived near me. We went all round the country there and back every day and I was never home until five in the evening. We done a whole lot of plays at the school and there was one about a banana and I was the banana and we did Jack and the Beanstalk too."

"When I was 11, I went to A. school because the boys had to move on at that age. We never did any work except there was a henhouse we had to clean out. The hens laid eggs and we gathered them and sold them. They put the money away to buy stuff. Then we had the gardens and we grew vegetables and plants there. You weren't doing any work at all there except for bus trips. The teacher seemed to want you out all the time."

"When I left school I joined the tech. I think that was arranged through the school. When I finished the course, I got a job in the chicken factory but there was a bit of hassle there so I left. There was a fellow there who spat on me every time I walked past. He did it all the time. I did report it but nothing was done. After that I got a job in the supermarket but I left because of my knee. I was out in the car park all the time and they had me down on my knees cleaning drains. I was mucked up so much one day they had to take me home to get washed and changed and they left me to make my own way back to work. My knee went on me so I had to give that job up."

"I got fed up sitting at home so I went back to the college on the Jobskills course. They put me on placement in another supermarket but I didn't like it. I was interested in retail but they had me out cleaning the car park all the

time. They moved me to another supermarket and I was packing shelves there. I really liked it there until the wee bit of hassle about the job. I was good enough to work there on placement but they didn't even give me an interview when I applied for a job."

..... his social life

"I have a load of mates about the town. We go the pub or just hang about. In college I'm friendly with most of the students."

..... himself

"I was in a car accident last month and now I'm worried about my leg. I don't know if it'll keep me back. My eyesight worries me too. It's okay at the minute though one eye is better than the other. I'm interested in computers too. I would like one at home."

..... goals for the future

"In the future I would still like to get a job at the caretaking or in a shop. I was wondering if I could get my next work placement in a radio station, with me doing the sound for our own show. I could be a D.J."

Other perspectives on Jim's educational experience

Jim's father related school problems to the visual impairment:

"It was his eyesight. He couldn't see the board at that first school. He did well up in the other place but he never liked the tech."

..... Jim's social life

When I asked college staff about Jim's social life there was some disagreement. The tutors felt he didn't have any friends at all while the classroom assistants, who saw more of him at unstructured times, both named one or two other students. Jim's parents said he was friendly with 'a lot of them round the town.'

..... Jim himself

In relation to Jim's behaviour in college, there were again mixed responses

from the staff:

“He thinks he’s better than he is, doesn’t accept his disability.”

“No problems, except for his obsession with the radio. It’s got beyond a joke.”

“He would try to be over-friendly with the staff.”

The staff and Jim’s parents all articulated the view that he did not see himself as having learning needs and that he would not listen to advice.

..... goals for the future

In relation to future prospects, there was agreement in the college that employment was very unlikely although a sheltered placement might be possible.

Jim’s father too was pessimistic:

“Sure, he has had dozens of wee jobs already. He never sticks at anything. His head is just full of that radio nonsense.”

Briege

Briege is 23 years old and lives with her parents, brother and sister. Since taking part in this project, she has become increasingly violent and has recently been admitted to a large hospital for adults with very severe learning disabilities.

Briege’s perception of her education

“I started St. C. primary school when I was five and there were friends there. We played in the Wendy House. Then I became very aggressive. The school phoned my mum and said, “ We can’t control her.” I was pulling hair because the other ones, they were good at the work and that offended me, because I couldn’t do it. I was moved to K. school when I was six.”

“When I left school, I went to Jobskills in Newtownards but I mixed in with the wrong person. I never wanted to go in the first place. I didn’t have a choice. One day I

threw soil up the stairs and the boss, he called me up to his office and I just went mad. I saw the phone on his desk and I just grabbed it and flung it across the room and I swiped everything off. My friend couldn't believe it. Then he said, "I'm going to phone the police." I didn't care. They phoned my mum and she was furious. They put me off the course. I was happy. It was my own decision."

"Now at the college, I'm doing a mainstream childcare course and it's very interesting, all about wee ones and what they need and about residential care. I have a friend on that course, a woman with glasses who talks to me all the time. I was very surprised to get on a course like that so soon. My mummy thought I shouldn't move on so she was shocked. She didn't expect me to move on so quickly. I like the both courses. Drama is my favourite and the English Speaking Board exam. I hate the maths the most. I would love a work placement in a nursery or playgroup with babies or young children."

..... her social life

"My mummy says I have no friends. I never had any till I came here. Now I have a whole lot of friends on the course."

..... herself

"I was a very lazy baby, my mum told me. I wouldn't even try to climb out of the cot. I walked at a year and a half. Everybody else walked at a year. When I was two my mum's sister looked after me and I was just sitting in one place all the time. Normally wee children run about all over the place but I didn't. When my mummy came back she said, "There's something wrong with her." I had a high temperature and I was rushed to the hospital in Belfast. They thought it was meningitis."

“With me, the problem is what I might do next and my mum says I will do the same thing here as I did before with the violent behaviour. I’ve told her I won’t do it again because I’ve learned my lesson but she doesn’t believe me. She says we’ll have to wait and see.”

..... goals for the future

“When I think about the future I think I might be still at home but I might move and bring the rabbits with me. I would like to live on my own, to have my own independence but it might upset my mum. When my sister and her husband got their new house my mum was shocked because it was so soon and even my dad too.”

Other perspectives on Briege’s education

Briege’s mother claims to have had a succession of problems with her daughter:

“I’m at my wits end. No matter where she has been there have been problems. She lasts no-where.”

.....Briege’s social life

Briege’s social behaviour at college was causing concern:

“She’s always flirting with the males in the group, winding them up, causing bother.”

“She has no friends although some of the males fancy her.”

Briege’s mother confirmed her isolation:

“She has no friends at home. She walks about the road herself.”

.....Briege herself

College staff described problems in the management of this student:

“She’s aggressive and manipulative.”

“She talks to herself all the time.”

Her parents confirmed that there were problems at home as well:

“She would kick and scream on the floor or sometimes she goes outside and just yells.”

“She walks the roads with that rabbit of hers in her arms.”

Her parents had no idea what the problem was although they had been told it might be a psychiatric one.

The staff thought so too:

“I think she’s depressed although it could be to do with her home life too.”

“She’s very jealous, hates anyone else getting attention.”

“It could be to do with home but maybe it’s her mental health.”

..... goals for the future

In terms of the future, no-one could see any hope of employment for Briege. Psychiatric care was the only possibility mentioned by the staff. The parents agreed:

“We don’t know what’s going to become of her. We’re just worried sick.”

Stage Two Data: part two

The following data relate to the interactive dimensions of social behaviour observed and were obtained primarily from observation sessions. Additional interview material is included where it has the potential to offer a further insight into the behaviour under consideration.

Tutor : Student Interaction

In interviews, college staff were asked to describe the students in terms of their behaviours. There was a very high level of consensus among staff responses except in the case of Jim who was seen by his tutor as outspoken and, at times, aggressive and by his support worker as ‘a harmless, likeable

big fella’.

Some students were described by the teaching staff as exhibiting a number of undesirable behaviours but there was no correlation between the number and severity of the behaviours described and the frequency of reprimands used in the classroom. Staff, for example, saw Niamh, as huffy, stubborn, bad-tempered, self-centred and prone to crying ‘at the least wee thing’. In observation sessions, however, I witnessed only two fairly mild reprimands, which resulted in tears that very quickly disappeared. Briege, too, was described by staff as exhibiting a number of extremely challenging behaviours and yet she was not reprimanded at all in any of the observed sessions.

The other student who was not reprimanded at all was Martina, who was described in interviews as co-operative, passive, socially withdrawn and quiet. Concern was expressed about her tendency to stare and to become stressed easily. There was also some suspicion that she used her smile to get her out of all sorts of trouble. In observed sessions, she gave little cause for reprimand but there were occasions when she failed totally to cope with specific tasks such as literacy worksheets. Her progress in this area was significantly slower than that of the other students and many of her errors were overlooked. At the same time other students were being told in no uncertain terms that their work was below standard.

On other occasions, I observed Martina producing homework which indicated clearly that she had not understood what was required of her. Again, teaching staff would either ignore completely the fact that it was the wrong work or would suggest that it was perhaps not totally finished. On all occasions she was praised for her efforts. While she clearly enjoyed the positive feedback and expressed in interviews her love of the college, I, at no time, during this research period, saw a member of staff taking time to clarify a mistake or to teach a particular skill or piece of knowledge to this woman.

There was also some discrepancy between what staff said they did and what

actually happened when problems did occur. Briege liked to talk at length about her past history of violence and aggression. Although staff, in interviews, professed not to be influenced by these behaviours, in observation sessions, this girl was very rarely reprimanded and would sometimes adopt a range of agitated behaviours such as wringing her hands, drumming her fingers or talking to herself. On all occasions these behaviours were totally ignored by staff and the rest of the class but, for the student herself, the result was that she was left to her own devices and was not challenged about unfinished or inaccurate work.

Overall, however, there was a significant amount of negative feedback from teaching staff to the students and some students were reprimanded extremely frequently. Four of the students, John, Sandra, Ivan and Jim received reprimands on 50% or more of the occasions observed but there was no corresponding decrease in their attempts to gain the tutor's attention. In fact, the students who most frequently incurred the tutor's wrath were among the students who most frequently sought staff approval. These students were very critical of the same, or similar, behaviours, in others and, when asked, could explain what had angered the tutor.

Three of these students, Sandra, John and Jim, were identified by all staff as 'seeing themselves as better than the rest' and as overrating their own capabilities. Interview and observation data suggested that an ongoing source of 'annoyance' was the behaviour of students who were seen as having unrealistic notions about themselves. This was explained by the staff in terms of the students' desire to be normal and of their refusal to accept that they have a learning disability. Two of the three students attended a local school for children with severe learning disabilities where they would have been among the most 'able'. The last of the three, Jim, attended an M.L.D. school but transferred at the age of 11 to a small country school for boys with learning difficulties.

During one observation session, in the drama group, John was told to sit to the side because he was 'refusing' to follow instructions. This followed several reprimands from the tutor, each louder and angrier than before.

Despite this, when it came to selecting the main role in their play, John was first to appoint himself. The tutor, now very cross, told him to sit down. The same scenario was played out in relation to each subsequent role. At the end, I overheard John asking the tutor to pick the best dancer from the group. When asked why, he replied, "Because I think it's me."

In another class, computers, this student resorted, at times, to complete withdrawal even though he had expressed a particular interest in the subject. I was usually in the room at the time of his class and was in a position therefore to observe his progress over the term. Initially, he was enthusiastic and usually one of the first into the room. Quickly, however, a number of problems emerged. He was frequently reprimanded by the tutor who would become enraged when he chose not to follow her instructions. On one occasion, after she had spent considerable time correcting his work he immediately erased the new copy and began again, making the same mistakes. On another, following a plea from the tutor to the whole class not to send any more work to the printer because she was running out of paper, he printed out twenty copies of something that had nothing to do with the work in hand. The tutor reprimanded him loudly and at length.

After five weeks the student was reluctant to begin work in this class and *would sit for fifteen minutes without turning on his machine*. On week eight, the classroom assistant had to go and look for him since he did not appear for the class. By the end of term, the student was remaining behind in another classroom to *finish his literacy work* and was not joining the computer class at all. The tutor allowed this to happen and justified her decision in terms of John not being 'worth the bother!' The student still identifies computers as one of his favourite subjects.

Another student, Sandra, after a series of 'failed' placements, refused to participate any further in the work experience scheme. The tutor attributed this to the fact that she was 'just lazy'.

In the literacy and numeracy classes I observed the frequent use of lengthy, almost incoherent, responses to tutor questioning. Although I observed this

in all the students, it was particularly prevalent in relation to John and Sandra, both of whom have been cited in relation to withdrawal activities. Tutor responses to the behaviours included moving on to another student with only a brief comment about the irrelevancy of the answer and providing the correct answer themselves without any reference to the student's response.

Only the course tutor consistently dealt with the problem by insisting on a short, direct answer and stemming the flow of the monologue at an early stage. When an answer was produced my observations suggested that the students were correct on approximately 50% of occasions. This tactic, therefore, while relatively successful in avoiding failure half the time, also resulted in students not achieving success when it would have been possible.

The impact of John's speech impairment was also evident. On some occasions, when he wanted to make himself known to a new member of staff or when he had a piece of news he wanted to share, his speech was relatively clear. At other times, I was totally unable to understand anything he was saying. This tended to be in the formal classroom situation when he was asked a question or challenged about something. It also occurred if he was in an activity about which he was unhappy, perhaps because he was working with other students not of his own choosing or because the task was difficult.

The three students, Sandra, John and Jim who stood out as engaging most frequently and with most 'commitment' in 'withdrawal/avoidance' behaviours are the same students identified earlier by staff as overrating their own capabilities. All three indicated they wanted to have high profile jobs in the media, all assessed themselves extremely positively and none acknowledged difficulties or restricting factors.

The behaviour of these students was noticeably different in the drama group. Reprimands in this class did not result in withdrawal and/or avoidance. All three students were highly motivated and participated fully, competing for the lead role in all productions. John was constantly in

trouble for his failure to work co-operatively with others but his response was invariably to 'hang his head' for a few minutes and then rejoin the class with enthusiasm.

In one drama session I was observing the course tutor asked if she could talk to the group about some problems which had arisen that week. Three of the students involved in this project were in the class and were among those to be reprimanded. At the end of an hour long session, during which the tutor verbally accused a number of students of being 'lazy', 'uncommitted to the course' and of 'behaving like babies', I asked the group how they felt about what had just been said. Despite the fact that their tutor had left the room, they all agreed that it had been an excellent meeting and that it was really important to talk about the problems on the course. When encouraged to express their true feelings those students who had borne the brunt of the tutor's wrath remained adamant that they were neither angry, embarrassed or depressed about what had been said. Only after I suggested that I personally would have been really angry at being 'shown up' in front of the others did two of the students agree that they too 'would have been' (not 'were') very cross. None of those present showed any emotional reaction to the tutor's anger and within minutes they were fully involved in planning their next drama project.

I had the opportunity towards the end of the project to observe one of the teachers from the special school attended by six of the students. She was involved for a term in a joint drama project with the college. In her dealings with students and her own pupils, she praised them highly for everything regardless of the quality of their work or behaviour. Reprimands were extremely infrequent and mild. While we cannot generalise on the basis of one teacher's approach, I suspect, from my contact with other staff in the school, that this does reflect an overall ethos. It is unlikely, therefore, that students coming to college have had previous experience of being disciplined or given continuous negative feedback.

A high level of student initiated interaction was evidenced in classroom observations. Six of the eight students continually sought approval on seven

or more observed sessions in the classroom. Briege and Martina were the exceptions. At break and coffee times the same six students approached tutors or classroom assistants in five of the observed, unstructured periods. On four other occasions I observed a succession of students waiting 'in line' to share titbits of personal gossip. Staff responses were uniformly brief but varied, in tone and degree of warmth, depending on the student. Martina and Jim, for example, received longer and more subtle responses than Ivan or John.

Student : Student Interaction

Observation and interview data related to the students revealed an almost total lack of interest in each other. On six of the ten occasions when I observed the students at break and lunchtimes, John, Niamh and Ivan made no contact at all with others on the course. Bernadette, in all ten sessions, talked incessantly about herself, with little or no feedback from her 'audience'.

When individuals arrived into college with serious and important pieces of news the reaction of the others was invariably to produce some tit-bit of information about themselves. On one occasion a student, obviously distressed, revealed that his nephew had been admitted to hospital seriously ill. The immediate response of the student closest to him was to say she had got two new jumpers at the weekend. On another occasion, a young woman arrived back to college saying that her father had died the previous week. The response of one student was to say she knew somebody who had died while another said it was his birthday.

Four students, Sandra, Martina, John and Briege, named three or more other students on the course as being their friends. In observed sessions, little or no contact between these 'alleged' friends took place.

In six out of ten unstructured observation sessions, John had no social contact of any kind but sat, often with his head down or in his hands, some distance from the others. On the remaining four occasions, he initiated

contact which was terminated quickly by the other person involved. On only one occasion did he speak to another student. This was to tell her he had won the lottery. Her response was as follows:

“That’s great, John. I’d like to win the lottery. Would you not Martina?”

She then moved away to continue her conversation with someone else and John sat down alone. In his individual interview, John referred on ten separate occasions to the fact that he had some, or lots of, friends but at another stage expressed the need to find a friend. Interview data suggested that John was including staff members among his friends and girlfriends and was then hurt when they left or got married.

There was also the suggestion that other disabled people were not desirable as friends. Recently, John returned to college after having been on holiday in the United States. On his arrival, he was greeted by four or five students who welcomed him back and commented on his trip. His response was to acknowledge them briefly and then move to the opposite side of the room where he sat down alone. A few minutes later he approached a small group of staff to tell them about his holiday. This was despite the fact that earlier observation data clearly suggested he has always been ignored or ‘brushed off’ by tutors and care staff.

Of the three female students, only Briege initiated and sustained conversations on a frequent basis. She did not however single out people to talk to or seek out a particular friend. Instead she would initiate discussion with any group of students who happened to be sitting nearby. She was flirtatious with the males in the group but again would transfer her affections from one day to the next, or even from one hour to the next. Both Martina and Sandra made little effort to initiate conversations with other students although Sandra did, on four occasions, join in with group discussions. Again, she did not seek out individuals on a consistent basis which might have indicated a closer relationship.

Sandra did indicate that she had a special friend outside the college whom she had known for some time and with whom she was in a primarily caring

role:

“Imagine this, Catherine and I are now 25 years since we started together....I have my friend in the hostel ...I go there...and help out....and play for them....I feel sorry for her, locked up like that.” (individual and group interviews)

Sandra's parents confirmed the lengthy friendship and Sandra's view of herself as the 'carer'. They also informed me that it is planned for Sandra to move into the hostel with her friend when her parents are no longer able to cope.

Of the remaining students, one (Niamh) identified a staff member as her special friend, another (Ivan) named the employees at his work placement and two (Jim and Bernadette) identified non-disabled friends from outside the college. Jim's parents said he was friendly with everyone where he lives but were not able to identify any particular individual. In Bernadette's case, her mother confirmed that she did spend a lot of time with one female friend and that they went swimming and shopping together. This was possibly the only instance I could identify of friendship involving an equal, reciprocal relationship and the spending of time together.

Bernadette and Jim were also the only students who appeared to have a social life outside the family which did not involve attendance at a club run exclusively for disabled people.

Parent : Student Interaction

There were marked differences in relation to parental attitudes and responses to their son or daughter's disability. There were also differences in relation to parental attempts to protect their son or daughter from the reality of their situation.

In Sandra's case, her father, while discussing her enforced transfer from one school to another, in the presence of Sandra, said:

“There’s no doubt in my mind. It was because she has...is from Downpatrick”. He then winked and whispered, “That’s what we told her, instead of the other, the Down’s”.

In John’s case, his parents made frequent reference to the fact that boarding school was the most appropriate place for him because they were travelling a lot and the climate would not have been suitable for their son:

“He has always wanted his own independence. He wouldn’t be happy any other way. He’s such a capable chap.”

Jim’s parents suggested that the learning disability was a temporary problem which had meanwhile been sorted out:

“Sure, he’s great now, that fella. I think he wasn’t seeing the blackboard half right.”

Ivan’s mother focused on his inability to cope with stress and expressed the view that he was like ‘a late developer, going through the turmoil of adolescence’.

In contrast, the parents of Bernadette, Niamh and Briega acknowledged the problems and difficulties and were accustomed to discussing them with their daughters.

Sandra, John and Jim are all only children. The other five students all have at least one sibling and two are from large families.

Sandra appeared to have developed limited awareness of her disability.

“ And now I have a touch of being Downs Syndrome and I am a very up to date student. It’s because I could mix up with the other students. Now I didn’t know I could do that.”

Ivan, too, appeared to have little understanding of his problems.

“ I was nearly got in a trouble for repeating myself. My mummy tells me Stop repeating myself then I will not get into trouble as long as I do not go to repeat myself.”

Bernadette was noticeably more aware of the reality of her situation.

“ It was a hard time for my mummy as I was not developing as I should. I would scream and yell and bang my head off walls. Different people had different explanations but they did not know how to help my mummy.”

In a group interview, when asked about people they knew who had disabilities, five students described friends or neighbours that they ‘felt sorry for’ because they were in wheelchairs or were ‘a bit slow’. Only Bernadette acknowledged that she had a disability. In relation to my question about someone they were least like four students identified more disabled students on the course and one identified a very disabled adult who attended the day centre.

In group interviews, the students provided a number of examples of life areas over which the parents still had control. Sandra told us:

“My mother makes all the decisions but, if she gets stuck, she comes to me for extra help.”

She replied later, when asked about holidays:

“I went to the Share Centre. My mother told me. I didn’t know I was going.”

In relation to her finances, she responded:

“Well, my mother gives me money if I need it.”

Other decisions were also made for her:

“Oh yes, I’m the drinker. I can have a drink of anything, like when my mother or father are having a glass of wine, I have a sip of their glass.”

“Bedtime? 11 0’clock sharp. That’s me. My mother tells me.”

Martina began the interview by announcing that she made all her own decisions. She subsequently informed us that she wasn't allowed out because of her epilepsy, she wasn't allowed to drink alcohol 'because it's bad', she didn't handle her own money and even her clothes were bought for her:

"My mummy and daddy buy my clothes for me. I'm not allowed to go with them. Sometimes, I don't like what they bring me."

Direct observational data was not available to assess the impact of the differing accounts on the frequency and quality of the parent/child interaction.

Employer : Student Interaction

Again, it was not possible for me, within the constraints of this project, to observe directly the two students on work placement. Their experiences, however, merit description at this stage.

Bernadette had attended a school for children with moderate learning difficulties and then the special unit in a mainstream secondary school. Academically, she coped easily with the key skills and vocational training undertaken during the year at college and was the highest achiever in the group, being awarded the 'Student of the Year' trophy in December. She undertook a work placement in a local shop and lasted only one day. The supervisor contacted the tutor at lunchtime to say that Bernadette was complaining about everything she was asked to do and was no help whatsoever. This followed a placement in an office which also lasted a day. The supervisor could not cope with being told she was 'doing it all wrong' and with 'being challenged continually'.

Both employers stated that they would not accept a student with learning difficulties on placement again. Although the placement supervisors had given Bernadette a 'very poor' rating in relation to skills, attitudes and independence, Bernadette, last year, started up a mini-company (a tuck

shop) in the college and made almost £1000. She had taken total responsibility for the venture and had worked consistently with a number of others to ensure its success.

Ivan was not involved in any vocational or academic classes in college because of his 'inability to understand what was required of him'. He was, on occasions, aggressive and threatening to staff and other students and constantly demanded one-one attention. A work placement, valeting cars in a small garage, had, however, been found for him. There were only three other employees and this had lasted for three years. Ivan's report from the supervisor was extremely positive and his ability to work consistently over a lengthy period of time was recognised.

Some of Ivan's more challenging behaviours had been evidenced by the employer. He had sworn and become aggressive in front of customers when he had run out of things to do and his employer was not available to allocate extra work. He had also attempted to sell a car himself when the employer was in the office on the telephone. On yet another occasion, he had ordered his employer and some business colleagues out of the office because he wanted to have his lunch there. The employer, in interview, recalled these events with some degree of amusement!

Ivan's day had to be organised so that he would have little opportunity to become bored or frustrated. His employer was relatively successful in achieving this and was appreciative of the contribution made by the student to the business. While recognising the placement as the perfect 'match' for Ivan, his tutor saw little chance of progress, given that 'no other employer would be so tolerant'. Unfortunately, Ivan lives a distance from the placement and travel problems make an increase in days there impossible.

CHAPTER FIVE : DISCUSSION

Theoretical Perspectives

While the work of this project has been essentially exploratory and very tentative, a number of salient themes have emerged. These are of potentially practical value to those working in the field of education. One of my priorities, in writing this report, has been to produce something which would have relevance, not only to teachers in special education, but also to the wider range of staff working with students who choose, or are chosen, not to be included in mainstream education. This would include disaffected young people, adults with mental health problems and those who live their lives on the fringes of society. It would be a real bonus if work of this type could even be seen as providing a useful prompt for all teachers to examine their approaches and explore the dynamics of their practice.

Data obtained during the course of the research would appear to support my initial suggestion that it is over-simplistic to attribute all social skills deficits to levels of intelligence or cognitive development. Students like Bernadette and Briège, who were functioning at a higher level academically, prompted some of the most negative appraisals in terms of social behaviour and appeared to have very significant difficulties in gaining acceptance in the 'non-disabled' world. In contrast, other participants such as Martina, who seemed to have limited understanding of the taught programme, were viewed in a much more favourable light. These data also support a view of social competence which is essentially dynamic. The perceptions and responses of other people were as critical as the level of social skill demonstrated in determining whether or not the behaviour was effective.

Gardner (1993) proposes the notion of **multiple intelligences**, which include personal intelligences, the ability to understand and respond to others (interpersonal) and the capacity to access and use self-knowledge (intrapersonal). Goleman (1996) also suggests that academic intelligence has little to do with emotional life and argues that people with high IQs can

be ‘stunningly poor pilots of their private lives’ (p.34). He stresses the role of **emotional intelligence** in making successful life choices. While these alternative perspectives are of potential value, it is also important not to ignore the impact of the learning disability, particularly in relation to the cognitive aspects of social and self-knowledge. Further research is needed in relation to the extent to which the acquisition of personal and emotional intelligence is affected by learning disability.

In order to explore the specific ‘impairments’ in social competence, suggested by the data, it is necessary then to consider other underlying cognitive mechanisms which are independent of IQ. Premack and Woodruff (1978) propose a model specifying a mechanism which underlies a crucial aspect of social skills, namely the ability to input mental states to oneself and others. This ‘**theory of mind**’ enables the individual to make inferences about what others believe and to predict what they will do.

Although the majority of adults with autism also have severe learning difficulties (DeMyer *et al.*, 1974) this in itself cannot be used to explain the social impairment. There are autistic people with IQs in the normal range who do not show a corresponding improvement in social functioning. One suggestion is that people with autism do not have a ‘theory of mind’ which arises from the capacity to form ‘second-order representations’ (Dennett, 1978). An inability to form these representations, then, would result not only in the lack of a ‘theory of mind’, and its resulting social incompetence, but also in the absence of pretend play in childhood (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1985).

In the case of children with autism, including those with higher IQs, pretend play is lacking. However, children with Down’s syndrome and severe learning difficulties do have this capacity (Hill and McCune-Nicolich, 1981). Again, the notion of mental age is clearly not helpful. Baron-Cohen *et al.*, (1985) support the hypothesis that children with autism do not have the ability to represent mental states and, as a group, fail to employ a theory of mind. They further suggest that this failure is a cognitive deficit largely independent of general intellectual level. Given the

performance, in their study, of children with Down's syndrome who had more severe learning difficulties, Baron-Cohen *et al.* conclude that it also constitutes a specific deficit and cannot be attributed to the general effects of learning disability. While 'theory of mind' is therefore a useful perspective in terms of our understanding of people with autistic spectrum disorders, there is, as yet, no clear evidence to suggest its value in relation to the more general population of people with severe learning difficulties. In my own study, data from interviews suggesting awareness of other people's perceptions and observation of role play activities in the drama class would suggest the use of 'theory of mind' by many of the participants.

While the perspectives outlined above would appear to be both relevant and timely, I see their major limitation, for my own purposes, as being the fact that they do not adequately address the dynamic aspects of social functioning. Given my concern to understand the impact of current and historical contextual influences on the experiences of the adults in the study, I think it is therefore also useful to consider the project in the light of **psychodynamic theory**. This approach incorporates any type of psychological knowledge related to the conscious and unconscious processes of the brain. It acknowledges the influence of biological, cognitive and affective factors and recognises the importance of the social context. The reasons behind most human action are not, therefore, as they would first appear and much of our lives are concerned with the resolution of conflicting forces (Brearley, 1993). In the current study, there was some suggestion, among the students, of key conflicts around inner/outer reality, self/others and past/present.

This theory also embodies a view of determinism which includes the notion that all our actions are related to events in the past that are deeply embedded in our psychological make-up. As such, they are largely unconscious and may result in behaviours which are irrational, self-destructive or self-defeating. Such behaviour would be seen as evidence of inner conflict. These conflictual states are managed through the use of defence mechanisms which allow functioning to continue relatively unimpaired. When the use of such mechanisms becomes excessive, and we repeat the

same mistakes over and over again, this can have negative and long-term effects. (Lemma-Wright, 1995)

In the current study, there was some suggestion that past experiences may have had a significant impact on the current lives and behaviour of the students. John was able to provide a vivid account of the experience of being sent to live in a residential school at a very young age and his current problems in forming and maintaining relationships could usefully be explored in the light of separation and attachment theory (Howe, 1995). Where other students had been rejected or bullied at school there was also the suggestion that defence mechanisms such as denial and transference were, and still are, serving a protective function.

Given the negative, and sometimes even traumatic, experiences of many of the students, I think that psychodynamic theory can offer a useful perspective. However, this is not to assume that all individuals with severe learning difficulties have deep-rooted psychological problems or that all are consumed with inner conflict. More research is needed in relation to the existence of mental health problems within the population of adults with severe learning difficulties. In stage one of the current study, there was the suggestion that a number of individuals, despite the severity of their disability, are happy with their current situation.

It would seem, then, that while the above perspectives all have relevance in relation to at least some aspects of the research there is no single approach which provides all the answers. In terms of achieving greater understanding of the students, then, best practice would perhaps involve looking at each one individually and using the theory, or combination of theories, which offers the most plausible insights.

Issues in Context

Exclusion

All of the students involved in this study have been subject to processes of exclusion within the education system. From very young ages they have become accustomed to be collected at their homes by 'special' transport, taken to special schools or units and transported back in the evening. Their contact with the world outside, in most cases, is limited to attendance at the local 'Peter Pan' club and church and charitable outings. This, according to Skrtic (1991), results in them becoming part of a relatively homogeneous and controllable disabled population in which confrontation resulting from failed educational practice can be avoided.

There was some suggestion, in this study, that this is not always the case. Failed placement experiences for four of the stage two students, and clear potential threats to the fifth, have served to highlight weaknesses in the system. There are also clear indications that some adults are not prepared to accept day care alternatives and it is, therefore, over-simplistic to talk of homogenous groups. Students such as Bernadette and Ivan are committed to finding employment and are unlikely to settle for anything else without much protest and anger. This study also evidenced parental pressure, in three cases, for employment options to be available. Developments in the N.V.Q. framework, discussed by Tomlinson and Colhoun (1995), earlier in this report, are likely to further highlight the role of the special system in creating problems and failure.

The current study also highlights a number of issues related to the suggestion by Oliver (1990) that the institutionalised regimes experienced by the students in this project encourage a 'sick role' resulting in dependence, passivity and an unequal distribution of power. This 'sick role' was evidenced in a number of students who talked at length about physical ailments which included a mobility problem, old knee injury, excessive sweating, speech impairment, visual impairment and epilepsy. These ailments were however frequently given as reasons why a particular (often

undesirable) task could not be undertaken or why a piece of work had not been completed. The sick role was, in these instances, performing a useful function.

High levels of dependence were recorded, in all instances, in relation to daily living activities. A correspondingly high level of control by parents and carers was also indicated (appendix 11). Oliver clearly sees this as a negative and undesirable experience for the adults involved. In this study, however, there were clear differences in response to the created or enforced dependency. While some students were far from passive in terms of their response to imposed restrictions (Bernadette is a good example), others appeared satisfied with the disabled role. The life story books, in these cases, described a happy, carefree childhood and adolescence and suggested real contentment with current circumstances (appendix 12).

Lack of awareness could be said to account for this satisfaction. The seven students who produced the most carefully compiled and positive histories all struggled with the self-awareness and evaluation sessions and were inaccurate in factual self-descriptions. The role of parents and professionals in colluding with the student is a possible factor for consideration and there are clear links here with Todd and Sheam's (1997) research on the role of parents as protectors and gatekeepers. What is significant is that these students were, and are, happy with their lives and have no motivation to change. Perhaps insufficient attention has been paid by researchers such as Oliver and Abberley to the individualised perceptions and responses of people to the experience of disability.

Abberly (1987) has talked of the imposition of psychological, financial and environmental disadvantages on people with disabilities. Again, this was evidenced in some instances in the current study. Students such as John, Bernadette and Briege often expressed unhappiness and discontent with their lives. They, like others in stage one of the project, described critical and stressful instances of hurt and rejection. Others, however, reported uneventful, stress free lives, describing themselves in terms such as happy, good, kind, musical, sporty, pretty, hardworking and handsome. There is the

suggestion that their parents had perhaps been successful in creating an alternative life for them which was enjoyable and rewarding. While Abberly and Oliver would see these students as oppressed and disempowered I am prompted to wonder if the quality of their lives would necessarily be improved through increased involvement in mainstream society.

The students, in this study, live in a very rural area with high unemployment and fairly widespread poverty. In many families, the main carers are reliant on benefits and, in some instances, it is the student with learning difficulties who is attracting the largest income into the home. In some areas then, it may be that having a disability does not result in financial disadvantage. In these cases, parents are not motivated to encourage their son or daughter to acquire employment skills and are fearful of any progress which might jeopardise this income. Often, at reviews, parents have refused to agree to their son/daughter progressing to a sheltered employment scheme. This has been on the basis that they are heavily reliant on the benefits and are unwilling to jeopardise this income in any way. It is important that tutors acknowledge the views of all those concerned and reflect them in terms of the learning programmes offered. In my own college, I am aware of students being 'allocated' to vocational training modules even though they have made explicit their wish not to work and not to be provided with placements outside the college. These decisions have been taken by the course tutor on the basis that the student should want to work.

Voluntary Organisations

Oliver (1990) talks about the tendency of others to view people with disabilities as poor victims or superheroes and to treat them accordingly. There was some suggestion in this project that the students had been, and still were, getting a number of messages from church and voluntary groups that they were nothing short of wonderful!

On one occasion, a student arrived into college with a trophy he had won at the local Gateway club disco dancing championships. He was duly praised and congratulated. Within the next hour, four more students arrived with

similar trophies and we realised that everyone who had taken part had 'won'. This giving of certificates and trophies is a frequent occurrence in both the voluntary sector and in the special school. Attendance at Riding for the Disabled, for example, results in a grand prize giving at the end of each term. Each participant is awarded a rosette and certificate and there is much clapping and cheering. In college, students may have to work painstakingly for several months before gaining accreditation which is little more than a signature on an ordinary piece of paper.

It would be worthwhile considering the relative value attached, by the students, to academic achievement and to easily gained trophies for leisure activities. Does the amount of effort involved affect the student's valuing of the award? Follow-up work in relation to these questions would be of benefit to the range of individuals working in this area. For practitioners, the need to identify and provide appropriate challenges would seem to be of much importance.

In contrast to clubs such as Gateway and Riding for the Disabled, the Dramability volunteers who were interviewed were fairly critical and, I believe, honest about the students. They identified a number of behaviours among the group which they found irritating and talked about the participants as individuals all with their own strengths and weaknesses. There was no suggestion of pity and no excuses made for unacceptable behaviour. While charitable groups may encourage a view of disability which is essentially about compassion, this is not necessarily the case. The training and experience of the volunteers in these groups and their expressed purpose would appear to be critical factors.

While the Dramability volunteers could not be accused of seeing the students as objects of charity, they did have a view of them as 'different'. This could be seen as supporting Abberley's (1987) view of society as creating and maintaining an underclass of people with disabilities. It is however important to recognise that a view of someone as 'different' does not necessarily imply a lack of acceptance or a view of them as 'inferior'.

Role of the Church

The role of the Catholic church in influencing the attitudes of the students themselves and of others with whom they come in contact has also been highlighted in this study. Its teachings are concerned with the notion of social justice and emphasise the need to respect the human person. Everyone should look upon his neighbour (without any exception) as 'another self' and this duty is seen as even more pressing when it involves the 'disadvantaged', in whatever area this may be. The equality of all men is emphasised and is based on the belief that we all have the same nature and the same origin. It is stressed that human beings are inter-dependent and that differences relate to age, physical abilities, intellectual or moral aptitudes and wealth. Talents are not allocated *equally* but this is seen as God's plan. These differences encourage, or even oblige, people to practice generosity, kindness and sharing. Furthermore, those in greatest need are seen as objects of a preferential love on the part of the church.

Findings here would suggest that this can work both for and against people with disabilities. One student spoke about her experience of being excluded from communion classes and this, I discovered, was not an isolated case. The difficulty for the church would appear to lie in the fact that the taking of Holy Communion is linked with the notion of reaching the age of maturity. The Church is clear that this does not refer to a chronological age but to a mental or spiritual stage at which the individual can understand the meaning of her/his faith. In the past some clergy believed that people with severe learning disabilities could not achieve this state. Currently, however, it seems that children with these disabilities are included in Holy Communion classes and do participate in the same way as their peers.

The church's position in relation to equality and disability is outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. There is an onus on all members of the church to work for the common good which is described as 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and easily' (p.420). One of the key elements comprising this 'common good' is respect for, and the promotion

of, the fundamental rights of the person.

In practice, while equality and social justice are acknowledged in the church's literature, the students' experiences were mainly of being on the receiving end of charitable acts such as free holidays, gifts and regular pilgrimages to Knock and Lourdes. It is difficult to understand how those individuals who are 'blessed' with numerous talents, and are therefore obligated to share and care, would see the receivers of their good deeds as equals. It could be argued that, for this to happen, the relationship would have to have some element of reciprocity in it.

I have spoken with a number of people, including parents themselves, who see these adults as eternal children and as being incapable of sin. One social worker told me that many believe they will be judged by God in relation to how they treat people who are poor or who have disabilities. He also said he was aware of one family who still believed that their child had been taken by the fairies and had been replaced with a child who had Down's Syndrome. How they treated this 'changeling' would determine how the fairies would treat their child. While most other families would laugh at such notions, the social worker was aware of a number of parents who believed strongly that God had intervened to give them a special child for a reason.

Oliver (1990) has described some charitable organisations as 'shameless' in the way they reinforce the 'burdens of charity' image. In practice, there have been benefits for many of the students involved in this study. Annual holidays and regular social events are organised using money raised throughout the year. However, this study suggests that dependency is acknowledged and even encouraged and that people with disabilities are seen as objects of charity. It is also possible that they accept this role for themselves.

In working with children, and adults with severe learning difficulties, insufficient consideration is often given to the religious and cultural beliefs of the family. There is a need for further research into possible links

between such beliefs and the resulting attitudes to disability but, unfortunately, I did not have time in this project to explore these issues in any great depth. The fact remains however, that, how we view people with disabilities affects our behaviour and our expectations of them. Parents who see their adult offspring as 'children' are going to treat them as children and this will impact on the work of teachers and professionals trying to encourage adult orientated behaviours.

Self-concept

Self-Enhancement

Data obtained from personal development worksheets clearly suggests that the majority of students rate themselves highly in terms of competence and 'attractiveness'. Their self-ratings were significantly higher than those of the tutors as evidenced in follow-up stage two interviews. Given that a great deal of preparatory work had been done in relation to ensuring comprehension of the personal assessment exercises there was the suggestion that students had not been accepting negative feedback, perhaps because it was not congruent with the self image they held. These findings would be in keeping with Argyle's (1969) suggestion that we all see ourselves as better, closer to our 'ideal' selves, than is actually the case and that, unchallenged, inflated images can be maintained.

There was the suggestion that these students had perhaps not been challenged in the past. Parental attitudes and excessive levels of praise for little accomplishment have already been noted in relation to teachers from the local special school but this does not explain why challenges in their present situation appear to be 'ignored'. Non-acceptance of negative messages could be viewed in the light of misunderstanding/confusion or, more likely, in the light of an overwhelming need to preserve the existing self-image.

In the students' personal histories, in some cases, individuals appeared to

forget 'key' data such as a school they had attended or a significant incident in their lives. When prompted to remember such facts the students continued to omit them from their worksheets, and, at a later stage, in their interviews. This led me to consider such oversights, not as weaknesses associated with the learning disability, but as part of a strategy designed to avoid or, at least minimise, the impact of painful experiences in their lives.

In other instances students would recall events which were potentially stressful but would interpret them in ways which made them more acceptable or, at least, bearable (appendix 13). Niamh remembered being kicked by other children at school. Despite the suggestion from another student that it was because they didn't like her, Niamh insisted it was just 'because I was going to the toilet'. Sandra remembered being sent to the hall for Holy Communion classes and the priest saying, "I'm not having her in my class." She still claims, however, to have had lots of friends and to have got on well at that school.

These omissions and interpretations could be seen, in the context of self-enhancement, as self-serving biasing mechanisms. Selective memory for positive events (Kunda, 1987), adjusting criteria for success (Dunning and Cohen, 1992), developing a system of excuses to explain failure (Snyder, 1985) and using self-serving attributions (Greenwald, 1980) have all been cited in the literature.

It is also possible that, because of the students need to maintain a positive self-image, reprimands, which threaten their self-perception, are rejected at source and are not allowed to register at any emotional level. Goleman's (1998) work, on the 'vital lie', stresses the need for the human mind to protect itself and suggests that it does this by dimming awareness, creating barriers and refusing to allow painful events to register at any level.

Nezlek and Plesko (2001) have examined the relationship between daily events and self-concept and have suggested that negative events affect the self-esteem much more than positive ones such as success and acceptance. Their findings suggest that, on a daily basis, aspects of the self and self-

concept may change in response to external events and internal states 'such as moods'. This raises questions in relation to the current study. Observation data, in this project, suggest that negative events such as reprimands and failure did not result in any observable change in mood or behaviour. Self-esteem, in all cases, appeared to be very stable and there was no evidence of daily variations in mood or self-concept. This could reflect the existence of a strong, inflated self-esteem and the on-going rejection, at source, of feedback which is not congruent with it.

Over a longer period, changes in behaviour were observed. John's reluctance to take part in the computer class, for example, would appear to be directly related to continual failure and reprimands. However, he continued to describe this class as one of his favourites and to persist in attention seeking behaviours in others. His withdrawal would perhaps be more appropriately interpreted in terms of self-efficacy, involving a capability judgement in relation to a specific task, rather than the more global construct of self-esteem. I will return later to this notion.

Like many of the other students, John actively sought recognition and praise from the staff. When this was received, the students would invariably look delighted and return to their work with increased enthusiasm. There is the suggestion here that positive rather than negative feedback had greater impact on the students, perhaps because it was acknowledged more readily. More research is needed in relation to self-esteem and self-concept clarity among adults with severe learning difficulties.

Franken (1994) suggests that the self-concept can be modified through processes of action and reflection. The apparent reluctance of the students in this study to engage in these practices would suggest that they are perhaps not motivated to change the existing view they have of themselves. When there is a discrepancy between the self concept and external cues, incongruence occurs (Rogers, 1980). This is confusing and threatening to the individual and, according to Rogers, can result in serious maladjustment.

These theories are, however, limited in relation to the student group in this

study. They do not take account of the fact that, when people are excluded and live lives that are separate from mainstream society, it may be possible to successfully create and maintain unrealistically high self-images. Within their daily activities there are perhaps no challenges to the self-image and therefore no 'reality checks'. Given that unhappiness and maladjustment are possible outcomes of acknowledging negative feedback, it is hardly surprising that it is so frequently rejected at source.

In this study, it was the students who had spent some time in mainstream schools or schools for children with moderate learning difficulties who recalled the most painful memories. Martina, Bernadette and Briege all remembered very serious incidents of bullying which could have resulted in psychological damage (appendix13). Without exception, those who only attended schools for children with severe learning difficulties remembered their schooldays with happiness and pride.

If an inflated self-image is allowed to develop in childhood (through the intervention of parents, teachers and charitable organisations) and is maintained in adulthood through the creation of lifestyles which are non-threatening does this result in optimal psychological functioning for the individual concerned? It could be argued that, in such cases, confusion and threat are avoided and that a clear and positive self-concept is maintained.

It could also be argued that it is only when the individual concerned chooses to increase her or his inclusion in mainstream society, perhaps by seeking employment, that it becomes an issue. Finally, one could ask if an inflated and unrealistic self-perception can serve a useful function in terms of providing a protective shield for people for whom the reality of their situation might be too harsh.

It is, of course, also possible that the more negative labels and messages given to the students were from people who were not seen as significant. This is unlikely given that much of the feedback was from teaching staff who, according to observation and interview data, were highly respected by the group. Argyle (1994) suggests that messages have most impact when the

'giver' is seen as 'expert', unbiased and worthy of respect and care. This would appear to be the way in which many students saw the teaching staff.

The influence of unrealistic self-images was also evident in relation to the students' expressed hopes for the future. Interview data suggest that many of them model themselves on teachers, pop singers, film stars and a range of other personalities. They also express hopes of working in occupations such as the film and radio industry and in journalism (appendix 14). This would be in keeping with the body of literature that suggests that students with learning difficulties frequently show strong self-concepts, perceive themselves as effective and capable and rate themselves higher than external raters (Priel and Lesham, 1990; Vaughn *et al.*, 1990). Self-descriptions which were included in some of the life story books also support this view (appendix 15).

This study is also in keeping with other research suggesting a sharp discrepancy between student self-assessment and that of the teacher (Graham *et al.*, 1993; Vaughn *et al.*, 1990). There are a number of possible explanations for this discrepancy. The first is that, as I have already suggested, the students deny their difficulties, a finding reported by other researchers such as Graham *et al.* (1993). Another possibility is that students infer from the teacher's praise that they are academically capable. Schunk (1985) and Licht (1993) suggest that teachers praise the efforts of students with learning disabilities and downplay their academic problems so that motivation and a positive self-perception are maintained.

In this study, the tutors were frequently highly critical of student performance and behaviour but, as I have already noted, this would not necessarily have been the case at school. The type of school attended may also be a factor although this was less clear from the data produced. What is likely is that the students started college with a view of themselves as effective and capable. Only one student, Martina, expressed any concern about her ability to cope in further education.

Social Comparison

It is also possible that high self-evaluations are related to comparison with the other students in the group. Three of the stage two students (Sandra, John and Jim) were only children and, when younger, did not have the opportunity to see themselves in relation to others who did not have a learning disability. Of the remaining five students, one attended a special unit in a mainstream school, one attended a school for children with moderate learning difficulties, one transferred from an M.L.D. school to mainstream secondary and two were transferred from mainstream to special education (S.L.D). Significantly, these students had more opportunities and more experience of working alongside children who did not have severe learning difficulties than the others. Inclusion in mainstream education would seem to be effective in relation to providing reality checks for children with disabilities. It might also be said that the price to be paid for this is a lowering of the self-esteem and an ongoing sense of failure.

Meltzer *et al.* (1998) found that students with learning disabilities, in their study, frequently compared themselves with a less competent peer group. There was some suggestion of a similar practice in this project (appendix 16). When asked, in one of the stage two group interviews, about people they knew who had disabilities, five students described friends or neighbours they 'felt sorry for' because they were in wheelchairs or were 'a bit slow' (appendix 17).

In terms of identifying other students whom they saw themselves as 'least like', one participant referred to a very disabled adult who attended the training centre while four others selected students who had much more serious difficulties. With the possible exception of Briege, it was also interesting that, while the notion of having a learning disability was unacceptable to the student group, they were all very willing to talk at length about physical or sensory impairments which were having a restricting effect on their lives. The students attributed a variety of difficulties to these impairments and wanted to talk about them. I suspect that this is because they see them as acceptable, in that many people suffer

from similar ailments but, as a result, are not seen as 'less able'.

Miller's (2000) study suggests that students use external social comparisons more than internal processes such as assessment of personal standards and performance knowledge in the academic setting. Where learning beliefs are based only on peer comparison, she highlights the risk of inaccurate capability ratings. Her study was concerned with adolescents and the importance of the peer group at this stage could have been a factor. However, in order to prevent the development of low perceptions and a resulting decline in confidence and motivation, Miller argues that students should be grouped with others of like abilities. This, she claims, will also limit the 'unrealistic upward expectations' of students placed in high achieving groups.

Within my own study, interview data suggest very high aspirations in a number of cases. Comparison with others who also have learning difficulties has been acknowledged as a possible contributing factor. More realistic assessments might result from placement in a higher achieving group. Bernadette and Briega, who both attended a school for children with moderate difficulties for a time, were possibly the most realistic in terms of possible achievements and aspirations. Jim, who attended the same school, was less realistic. It is possible that his visual impairment had a significant impact, in terms of allowing him to attribute his difficulties to the perhaps 'more acceptable' sensory impairment.

Coping Strategies

When failures did occur and the consequences were unavoidable, the students made use of a number of coping strategies. In the case of Sandra and Jim, failed work placements resulted in reluctance or refusal to participate further in the placement scheme. Like John in the computer class, it would seem that the students decided that a successful outcome was no longer possible. Bandura (1986,1997) identifies a number of antecedents which influence self-efficacy beliefs but stresses that it is the individual's perception of personal and situational factors which has the greater

influence. He cites previous success at the task, situational factors, and conception of ability as determinants of self-efficacy beliefs. Behaviour that involves 'opting out' suggests that the individual may view the problems associated with external, situational factors as being permanent, beyond their control and therefore insurmountable. It is also possible that mistakes are seen as internally located ie. indicative of intellectual incapacity or skills deficit, again implying a lack of control and resulting in anxiety.

Interview data, in this study, reveals that the students laid the blame for failed placements on other people or on characteristics of the work (appendix 18). Bandura (1989) suggests that cognition, motivation and task-selection are affected by personal judgements about ability to achieve success. I frequently observed one student in the drama group announce that the activity was too hard. He would then become so agitated and distressed that he would be unable to even attempt the activity which other students of similar ability were completing with ease.

Sandra's decision not to participate in the work experience scheme was interpreted by the tutor as symptomatic of her laziness. Given her desire to be seen as 'normal', it is much more likely, I think, that motivation to work was affected by previous failures and her perception that she would fail again. This phenomenon is also evidenced at the beginning of each term when students select their modules. Frequently, a student's decision to follow a programme, in which s/he has achieved well in the past, is interpreted by staff as suggesting laziness. It is perhaps more likely that students are selecting tasks with which they know they can cope.

There was, also, the suggestion that, in Sandra's case, she did not have all the necessary skills for the job. She talked about being embarrassed and not being able to think quickly enough. Refusal to participate further protected these students from more failure and reduced the potential for incongruence in terms of the self-concept. If employment was a real aspiration for the student involved, 'opting out' meant that they paid a heavy price in terms of future progression towards their goal. If their commitment to work was not strong, this was possibly a price they were happy to pay.

It would seem that failure in specific tasks and contexts can be acknowledged without any real damage to the self-esteem. The reasons attributed by the individuals for the failure are clearly of significance. Abramson *et al.* (1978) identify three dimensions for classifying causal attributions: locus of causality, stability and globality and assert that those who attribute failure to stable causes will continue for a long time to avoid the task or situation. Where the cause is seen as unstable, the behaviours will resume soon after because the cause of the previous behaviour will be seen as having changed.

The students in this study attributed rejection and failure almost exclusively to factors in the external environment which were both time and situation specific. The achievement-motivation model outlined offers possible insights therefore into the persistent involvement of students in behaviours which resulted in negative feedback. Lack of success may be seen by the students as resulting, not from something they have done, but from external, situational factors which are likely to change. The model does not explain why students like Sandra and John opted out of activities which they had, at one time, valued. They attributed failure to external, unstable causes but yet persisted in withdrawing completely from the activities. In these situations, the existence of the situation known as 'learned helplessness' (Abramson *et al.*, 1978) is suggested. It is possible that the students themselves did not believe the reasons they gave or that they did not value the activity enough. Again, another explanation relates to the need to preserve the self-concept and eliminate, at source, any threat to it.

Social Behaviour

Friendships and Social Contact

Observation and interview data suggest that many of the students, while wanting to be seen as having friends and while acknowledging the need for social contact, made little or no attempt to forge relationships with other

students on the course. There was a general consensus among college staff that six out of the eight stage two students did not really have any friends in the college. The remaining two students were seen as having one friend each. While there is possibly a skills issue involved, the fact that the same students made frequent approaches to staff also suggests a motivational factor.

A possible explanation for this is that the students were not motivated to make friends with other people who also had disabilities because this would, in some sense, confirm their own identity as a disabled adult. Once again, the need to maintain a sense of identity, which is perhaps at odds with the reality of their situation, is seen as directing and developing behaviours. Although social acceptance, praise and recognition are all basic human needs, in the case of some students, they are not met within the context of the peer group. Argyle (1994) suggests that the impact of feedback from other people depends very much on whether the other person is respected, cared-for or seen as unbiased.

Observation and interview data also suggest that the students involved in the project had no interest in each other and had no desire to learn about others in the group. In contrast, the students, without exception, made frequent approaches to college staff (appendix 8). While they talked a great deal about themselves some of the students also expressed interest in the staff and would listen with great interest to any snippet of personal information. Others appeared totally disinterested in anyone else's life or experiences. They were all, however, very keen to talk at length about themselves to tutors and classroom assistants.

It may be that the students involved see the staff as 'experts' and as being more like their ideal self than the other students. This was evidenced in interview data when John said the person he was most like was the course tutor. In motivational terms, although attempting to align themselves to the staff group may well result in failure, the chance of some, very small success in this respect may outweigh the fear of failure. John, through his persistent attempts, could be telling us how important it is for him to be

accepted by the non-disabled community. Unfortunately, it seems that the strategies employed by him only serve to alienate him even further from those whose approval he most values.

It is possible that, due to speech and other communication difficulties, the students find each other tiresome or boring and that too much concentration is required. It is also possible that the other students represent a world, and a culture, which they do not wish to espouse. If a prime motivating force in their lives is to become accepted in the non-disabled world they may feel that other students with learning disabilities have nothing to teach them. There is nothing positive to be gained from that world. This is feasible in relation to students like Bernadette, Jim and John who, in interviews, frequently referred to friendships and social contacts with non-disabled people and, in Bernadette's case, to embarrassment at being seen with a disabled group. It does not seem likely in relation to other students who expressed satisfaction with their current situation and no desire to be included further in society.

A third option is that these students have so little control over their lives that they have no interest in learning about how their friends do and experience things. As evidenced in both individual and group interviews, what they themselves do, and how they do it, is largely dictated by someone else. Very often, as a result of our own social interactions, we make decisions and change practices. If this were not possible, the purpose of the interaction would, in many cases, change or disappear altogether. In the end it might not be worth bothering at all. The suggestion here, is that there could be direct links between powerlessness, learned helplessness, social interaction and friendship patterns.

Finally, many of the students involved in the project have known each other since they were very small children. They have attended the same school, same training centre, same clubs and same college. Perhaps it is simply the case that they know each other so well, there is nothing to say any more. They are completely relaxed in each other's company and feel no pressure to make conversation. The experience of having lived their life in a group

may be the major influence on their current communication with each other.

These findings support an earlier study by Richardson and Ritchie (1989) which suggested that people with learning difficulties spend a high proportion of their time in the company of others but have few real friendships or relationships. Atkinson and Ward (1987) argue that these adults do have friends but not 'non-handicapped' ones. They highlight the potential for paid workers to inadvertently create barriers to the creation of friendships. In the current study, college staff often appeared to play a supportive role in relation to the students who, in interview, identified them frequently as friends or 'people who mattered'. There was the clear suggestion, in John's case, that residential staff were performing a similar function. Atkinson and Ward argue that because these professionals are performing many of the friendship functions and are so often physically present, the adults do not make and sustain new friendships.

Interview data with the Dramability volunteers, in this study, would suggest that it is over simplistic to assume that people with learning difficulties are hindered in terms of social contact by the presence of paid workers. The majority of volunteers expressed the view that they saw the students as different from themselves and would not count them as friends. They gave a number of reasons relating to aspects of personality and behaviour. College staff expressed similar views. It is perhaps equally possible that, in some cases, the presence of paid staff has a moderating effect on the individual's behaviour and that this, in fact, makes social acceptance more likely. Further research in this area is clearly needed.

As discussed above, observation data in this research also failed to support Atkinson and Ward's suggestion that the adults do have friends who are like themselves. Atkinson and Ward discuss the existence of 'social contacts', people who are seen regularly and frequently and who offer support. In this study, the students saw each other very regularly and frequently but there was little evidence of supportive relationships. Niamh maintained contact with one of the other students outside the course but ignored her totally in college. Sandra had a lengthy friendship outside college with another girl

who also had Down's syndrome. She, however, saw herself in a caring role with this friend and was keen to stress the 'lack of balance' in the relationship. Only Bernadette appeared to have a relationship with a 'non-disabled' girl who saw her often and provided interest and support.

When students arrived in college and were clearly distressed, there was some suggestion that the seriousness of the situation did not always impact. Stern (1987) locates such difficulties in the arena of emotional intelligence and suggests the importance of developing skills of attunement. Again, the role of parents and carers in protecting the students from the experience of grief, and the other harsh realities of life, must be considered in this context.

As discussed earlier in this report, there are problems of definition in relation to the concept of 'friend'. It is apparent from this study however, and from the other research mentioned, that adults with severe learning difficulties do appear to socialise in ways which involve less oral communication and are perhaps less 'intense'. What is less clear is the effect of this type of contact on psychological well-being. Argyle (1994) argues that personal relationships are the key to overall quality of life. There is danger however, in assuming that the social contacts and relationships evidenced in this study are qualitatively worse than those of the rest of the population. Social behaviour is reflective of cultural and personal ideologies and must be viewed in context. More research is needed in order to better understand the needs of the individuals concerned and the ways in which their patterns of contact meet, or fail to meet, those needs.

Issues of Contention

Interview data also evidenced a number of behaviours which, while prevalent within the student group, were seen as unacceptable by college staff and volunteers. If behaviour is to be viewed as the observable facet of internal functioning there is value in attempting to understand why behaviours which appear so important to many of the students are so unacceptable to the non-disabled population.

The use of physical contact is perhaps a good example. The students, when they first come to college, are often reprimanded for hugging, touching and generally invading other people's personal space. Teaching staff view this behaviour as childish and immature and lay the blame with parents and 'do-gooders' who should know better. If, however, we look at physical contact in the context of an alternative culture that values kindness, caring and the ability to show affection (and indeed where oral communication is often difficult) there is a clear need for a revised response. To say that hugging is not acceptable is then to say that we do not accept some of the values of this group.

By the same token, when students persist in dressing in ways seen by staff as inappropriate, does this indicate lack of motivation or understanding or does it suggest that they are rejecting values of the wider society which relate to personal appearance? I think that, while I do not have any right answers (and perhaps there aren't any), this is the kind of dialogue which needs to take place in staff teams working in special education.

Physical contact, withdrawal and self-focused activities are all actively discouraged because they break the rules of socially acceptable behaviour. When this approach is seen to fail, tutors and classroom assistants are quick to lay the blame firmly with the students who are not sufficiently motivated or able to behave 'properly'. This was evidenced in stage one and two interviews in this study.

Interview data also suggest that college staff and volunteers have never considered 'undesirable' behaviours as an intrinsic part of a culture to which the students belong. These staff and volunteers belong to a society which views, and frequently presents, people with disabilities as poor, dependent victims. However, when the students act in ways which reflect these images they are criticised and rejected. The students are given one message by the larger society as a whole and a quite different one from the non-disabled adults with whom they most frequently interact.

These students have functioned all their lives as a separate group involved

only minimally in the wider social world. Is it not to be expected that their values, expectations, rules and rituals might differ significantly from our own? Gross *et al.* (1997) argue that our ways of understanding the world are constructed through our daily interactions. There is no single 'truth' and no objective reality. If people with severe learning difficulties interact only, or primarily, with others who have the same disability is it not possible that, as a group, they produce and sustain social constructs, rules and rituals which meet their needs and which are significantly different from those held by people who do not have a learning disability?

Furthermore, if we accept this as a possibility, it raises the question of whether or not we, perhaps as members of the larger society, have any right to attempt to change their behaviour to make it acceptable to us. If we do that we are implying that, in some way, the culture of the middle-class, wider society is superior to theirs and that, in order to improve themselves, the students must reject their former inferior ways of behaving. It could be argued that changing behaviour in others is only justifiable when it will improve the quality of life for the person concerned. However, there is still the question of who defines what is an improved quality. Have we the right to make that decision for others?

Cognitive and Behavioural Approaches

Finally, while it would be oversimplistic to explain all 'inappropriate' reactions in terms of skills or knowledge defect, it would be just as unacceptable to deny the existence of skill or performance difficulties. Within college the students are expected to behave appropriately as adults. Acknowledging that they have not had sufficient opportunities to learn the behaviours which staff perceive to be correct, a great deal of time and effort is spent on drawing up contracts and devising personal and social skills training modules.

Coie and Dodge (1983) suggest that when children fail to acquire the social competence skills needed for the establishment of adaptive relationships, and when this failure is not addressed, there is a considerable risk of serious

problems later on. This view is supported by Fox and Savelle (1987) who suggest that social skills deficits may prove to be the most critical barrier to adult adjustment. These studies highlight the importance of making available to students, where there is a mutually agreed need, the necessary opportunities for development in this area. Gresham and Elliott's (1984) categorisation of the origins of social skills deficits is helpful in terms of prompting teaching staff to consider whether the problem relates to a skill which has never been acquired or one which has been learned but is not used. Within this classification there is also a useful focus on the possible influence of self-control issues on effective performance.

However, while this classification is useful in relation to the formulation of intervention strategies, it does not take account of the attributional style of the students as discussed earlier in this report. Lack of self-control may impact negatively on skills acquisition or performance. The attribution of success and failure to certain types of causes may also interfere with skills learning and maintenance. Weiner's (1986) latest reformulation of attribution theory identifies three dimensions of causality: locus, stability and controllability. The types of attributions made by socially unsuccessful children are very similar to those made by the academically unsuccessful ie. failure is related to internal-stable-uncontrollable causes.

The students, in this study, attributed failure to external-uncontrollable causes, which interestingly was the pattern identified among aggressive, socially rejected children (Crick and Ladd, 1993). In addition, the socially aggressive children were seen as having an over-inflated perception of the extent to which they were responsible for positive outcomes. This pattern was observed within the current study in interview data related to placement performance and educational experience. It is possible that what these students have in common with the 'aggressive' children is the experience and pain associated with rejection and a resultant need to engage in self-enhancement activity. While 'self-serving bias' is adaptive to some extent (Weiner, 1986), it can, in extreme cases, become a barrier to change. If social rejection is seen as someone else's problem the individual will not be motivated to change her/his own behaviour. This would seem a likely

scenario in relation to students such as Bernadette and John who, in the face of on-going failure and rejection, did not appear to recognise the possibility or desirability of change in themselves.

There is the suggestion then that social skills training should involve both behavioural and cognitive interventions. Modification of the cognitive processes involved in interpreting situations, alongside skills learning and practice, is perhaps likely to achieve the best results.

Significant Others

In group interviews (appendix 19), the students identified parents/carers and other family members as being the most important people in their lives. They also highlighted the role played by tutors and, occasionally friends, in providing support. In this section I want to look, in more detail, at the perceptions of these ‘significant others’ and at the way in which interaction with them impacts on the students’ behaviours. I will focus on the roles played by parents, tutors and placement supervisors.

Todd and Sheam (1997) have highlighted the role played by parents in denying their children opportunities for developing both self-awareness and a wider awareness of their situation. Life story data and individual interviews, in this study, provided many concrete examples of such practice. As in the case of Ivan, there was also the suggestion that many parents attributed difficulties to inherent characteristics in their offspring and reduced complex difficulties to simplistic, behavioural idiosyncrasies. This was, however, not always so. In college, Briege’s mother discussed frankly, with her daughter present, the difficulties they faced. Possibly, as a result of this, Briege was more realistic in relation to her experiences:

“The special schools are for learning difficulties where they help you out but you don’t get help in the ordinary one. If you’ve got the brains for the exam you can choose which school. If you have a learning disability you don’t

have a choice. They put you there because you've got this problem and if you decide you want to go somewhere they say no because you need help. It isn't fair because you've got the learning disability, right, and you've got this normal child at home who's got the brains and everything and they're allowed to go to any schools they want and you're not."

It is significant that Briege mentions the other child in the house because this also highlights the importance of siblings as providers of reality checks.

While she demonstrated the greatest level of awareness and possibly the most realistic self-concept, it is possibly not coincidental that Briege was clearly the most unhappy student and presented the most challenging behaviours. Only Bernadette and Briege expressed real anger and resentment about their experiences and stressed their desire to live independent lives. Their mothers talked openly about the stress involved in living with these girls and about the failure of professionals to support them. It may be that, in this way, the parents were also giving 'permission' for Bernadette and Briege to be angry. It is also possible that the parents' anger and resentment reinforced the daughter's view of herself as 'disabled' and encouraged a view of disability which was about failure and rejection. The response of the parent to the child's disability would appear to be a major influence in relation to the way in which the child relates to the learning difficulty. It is however also important to remember that these students were among the most capable academically and independence would have seemed a real possibility to them.

In attributional terms, Briege and Martina were more likely to attribute failure to internal-stable-uncontrollable factors than were the other students. Martina focused on her epilepsy while Briege referred to 'having bad, aggressive behaviour (appendix 13). There was a clear indication that Briege had accepted a view of herself as difficult and troublesome and that this had been communicated by her mother.

While the other students agreed and expressed the wish to go out more socially and mix more with other people they did not show any real emotion and did not appear to have made any efforts to change their situation. It is possible that they were saying the things they thought they should be saying, in other words, doing what they thought they should be doing, without any real conviction. This possibly raises important questions as to whether the students were excluded, or had withdrawn, from the social world.

The extent to which the parents had taken and maintained control of the students' lives was also highlighted in this study (appendix 11). The data obtained would support the view of Finkelstein and Stuart (1996) that over- or under-helping prevents children from acquiring essential skills and attitudes. Shopping, handling money and making decisions were all key areas where students had not had the opportunity to develop skills due to the high level of parental control.

Placement Supervisors

Only two of the stage two students were on placement during the research period. A third placement had broken down shortly before the project began. The comparative experiences of the students still involved on the scheme and the influence of their supervisors are however worth noting.

Both students, Bernadette and Ivan, are seen as having major difficulties in relation to social functioning. Both were described by college staff as demanding and 'endless' but both were also extremely motivated to find employment. Bernadette is academically much more able and has greater motivation to be independent and to have a more 'normal' life. Ivan has expressed no desire to be more independent and is accepting of the limitations imposed, as he sees it, by his epilepsy. He demonstrates little understanding of his difficulties and his behaviours are more challenging in that he is at times verbally threatening and abusive. His placement has however lasted three years while Bernadette has not maintained one for more than a day.

Interview data suggest that it is not the behaviours in themselves that determine success or failure in the placement. The interpretation of these behaviours and the subsequent response of other staff are of vital significance. In Bernadette's case, the supervisors saw her as lazy, unmotivated and critical. These assessments resulted from her refusal to do certain tasks because she would get her clothes dirty. On occasions she also suggested to the supervisor that there was perhaps a better way of doing certain jobs. While this was perhaps her attempt at being helpful it was interpreted as cheeky and inappropriate.

Ivan also engaged in some challenging behaviour while on placement. He tried to sell a car himself when the supervisor was in the office, he became verbally abusive when his boss would not end a meeting so he could have his lunch in the room and he swore loudly at the supervisor when the showroom was full of customers. In interview, the placement supervisor appeared somewhat amused at these antics. His response had been to deal firmly with Ivan and put an end to the problem immediately. He clearly viewed these behaviours as resulting from Ivan's disability and was prepared to tolerate them. This 'easy-going' approach had resulted in the *placement lasting a long time.*

These data suggest that intellectual ability is not a key factor in the ability of students to be 'socially acceptable' and to achieve social goals. It is possible that the students who are more obviously disabled, and more dependent, are more readily accepted than those who challenge or ask questions. Staff interviews and observations also suggest that those students who are most compliant are seen in a more positive light than those who are less co-operative. If that is the lesson that these children learn as they grow up, it is small wonder that such a high level of passive, compliant and dependent behaviour is demonstrated.

Teaching Staff

In the classroom setting, a high level of self-interest and attention seeking behaviour was recorded. Tutor frustration, and sometimes anger, was

evidenced but it was interesting that the level of annoyance displayed by teaching staff did not always correspond to the degree of 'challenging' behaviour displayed.

In terms of trying to understand why some students were subject to a lesser degree of discipline than others it is worth looking at the response the tutor would have expected if s/he were to challenge the individual. In Briega's case there was the threat of violence or at least an outburst, in Niamh's case tears were inevitable and in Martina's case staff expressed concern that a seizure might result given her low stress tolerance (of which there was no evidence). The student behaviours could be viewed, therefore, not simply as undesirable behaviours to be corrected, but as fairly effective strategies in terms of helping the student avoid the wrath of the tutor. Seen in this light, it is hardly surprising that students will not give them up easily, certainly not without having something with which to replace them. What these behaviours clearly do is give the student a degree of power or control which they perhaps cannot achieve any other way. Although the college staff, without exception, claimed to challenge the behaviours of the above students, the observation data would suggest otherwise and it is possible that these staff are unaware of the way in which they are being 'managed' by the students.

The price paid by some students can however be very high. In recent months, Briega has become increasingly violent and, following incidents when she held, first another student and subsequently members of her family, at knifepoint, she was admitted to a large institution some forty miles from her home. Again, we are left to wonder if a strategy which had short term payoffs, such as the avoidance of displeasure and the claiming of power, has, in the longer term, become a serious disadvantage for the individual concerned. Clearly, there are staff development issues related to the management of challenging behaviours involved in this scenario. For the Institute there are also issues related to referral and acceptance procedures for students. Most importantly, however, this example illustrates the significance of 'getting it wrong'.

In the case of other students, the 'threat' was more subtle. Reference was made by four of the staff interviewed to a previous outburst, two years ago, when Ivan had sworn loudly at a tutor. One member of staff admitted openly to being afraid of the consequences should she challenge him. Yet another student, Jim, had instigated legal proceedings against a local employer who had failed to give him an interview following a job application. The course tutor subsequently refused to challenge him about aspects of his behaviour which were causing concern on the grounds that she too might find herself in trouble. With yet another student, the possibility of an epileptic seizure, brought on by stress, was always present. This was despite the fact that such an incident had never actually occurred. The staff, however, all demonstrated an acute awareness of the student's medical condition and shared a common concern about her ability to cope with pressure.

A number of other behaviours were identified which may be perceived as dysfunctional but which also lend themselves to interpretation as effective, short term strategies for maintaining and enhancing self esteem and protecting the self from stress-inducing feedback. They include withdrawal, as discussed earlier, use of lengthy incoherent speech and total compliance. Observation data would suggest that John may have 'allowed' his speech to deteriorate, not as a means of getting attention, but as a means of avoiding potential failure and/or of expressing his anger. It is, of course, possible that the stress of certain situations resulted in speech deterioration beyond the student's control. I did however observe him very carefully and there was nothing in his body language or appearance to support this suggestion. The speech and language therapist agreed that John did use his speech impairment as an excuse for all sorts of other difficulties.

In the short term, a strategy of total compliance appeared to have a number of payoffs for Martina. In the longer term, her overall progress and attainment may well be adversely affected by these tactics and staff responses to them. Like many others, Martina would appear to have discovered that acquiescence and subservience are effective strategies for being accepted by, and coping in, situations where attributes and skills not

possessed by them are valued. This would be in keeping with Rogerian theory (Rogers, 1980) which emphasises the extent to which individuals will compromise and conform in order to gain acceptance and regard. Clearly, the possibility that a sense of powerlessness had resulted must be considered and its impact on behaviours should be explored.

It is perhaps significant that Martina is seen as most agreeable by staff. She has no control over any life area at home and has perhaps discovered that going along with things is easiest in the end. There is a real danger that she becomes, in Argyle's words, a 'social chameleon' (Argyle, 1994), willing to deny her own identity in an attempt to fit in. Closely linked, are, of course, notions of learned helplessness and perceived self-efficacy. Given that many students had personal histories suggesting powerlessness and failed challenges, it is not surprising that compliance and passivity have become common strategies. The students have become focused on coping with the emotional impact of failure rather than the practicalities of achieving success. It is possible that, the greater the desire to be accepted, the higher the level of compliance will be. It is, after all, a tried and tested formula and the data in this research would suggest that it is highly effective.

Tutor responses to Martina would support the view that teachers are unwilling to punish the failures of children with learning difficulties in order to avoid damaging their self-esteem. Even when these failures are seen as resulting from low effort the punishment is less than would be the case with a higher-ability child (Graham and Weiner, 1986). These researchers argue that anger or pity is often the teacher's first response to negative classroom outcomes and that pity results when the teacher views the child as not having the ability to succeed. The teacher's action is directed by her/his perception of the causal properties of the academic outcome. When students have learning difficulties, Clark (1997) suggests that teachers reward them more and punish less.

Observation data, in this study, highlight a high level of negative tutor feedback in the form of frequent and severe reprimands. Interview data also

suggest that tutors are critical of many students even when they attribute their behaviour to the existence of a disability or 'condition'. In other instances, college staff also attribute poor performance to factors external to the student, such as experiences at home or in day care. They do not however see this as, in any way, excusing the behaviour. Martina's placement supervisor reacted in a similar way while Ivan's boss related problem behaviours to his condition and made allowances accordingly. This would suggest that Clark's view is perhaps over-simplistic. It is also possible that, since her research was with general education teachers, the findings would have been different in a segregated setting.

Clark (1997) also suggests that teachers respond to students with learning difficulties on the basis of a belief that, to some extent, they will fail more, they are deserving of pity rather than anger and they should have more rewards and less punishments. In the current study, interview data suggest that the expectation of failure is high but there is no suggestion that pity and rewards are features of the interaction. Factors such as the training and experience of the staff, length of time working with the group, individual student behaviours and attitude to disability would appear to be influencing factors.

The responses of the students to the negative feedback are also of interest. Following the group reprimand, described earlier in the report, the students displayed no change in motivation or emotion. While I would have expected some degree of rebellion, or opting out, this was not the case. One explanation for this would be the possibility that the reprimands are so frequent that they have ceased to have any meaning or impact. It is of course possible, and, in fact, probable that any idea of rebelling or showing anger would be totally alien to some of the students given the lack of choice and control they have had until now. There are obviously links here with Peterson's (1992) account of learned helplessness and the accompanying passivity and belief that outcomes are not dependent on behaviour anyway.

Another option, is that, following each reprimand, the student feels all the more intensely the need to ingratiate her/himself with the teacher and that

this attempt to win approval can in itself result in further reprimands.

It is, of course, again possible that the lack of response relates to the self-protection strategies discussed earlier. These may involve rejecting at source any feedback likely to threaten the self-esteem. In attributional terms, it could also be that the students see the reprimand as relating to others rather than themselves (some suggestion of this was observed) or that they view it as resulting from external factors such as the tutor's bad mood or a misunderstanding on her part.

Their expressed agreement with the criticism would also suggest that adoption of the tutor's views and attitudes can be seen as a means of gaining her approval, a relatively strong driving force. Should such problems arise in the future it is possible that the students will have learned the correct response to them ie. they will know what they should say about them, but their own behaviour will remain unchanged. This would explain the frequency with which I observed tutor-led group discussions in which students condemned at length a variety of behaviours but did not relate to any of them on a personal basis. In group interviews too, there was evidence to suggest that students were keen, and able, to adopt a 'critical tutor' role when the opportunity arose.

The challenge therefore is to find ways of changing behaviour which do not threaten the individual and, in so doing, trigger the denial processes. In this respect Gardner's (1993) work, cited earlier, is useful, in that it focuses on motivating students from 'the inside' rather than through the use of threat or promise. The need for activities and tasks to be at an appropriate, achievable level is also highlighted.

Implications for Practice

Differing Perspectives

One of the most striking features of this research has been the discrepancies in perception that have been evidenced in relation to students, staff, parents and significant others. The section on student data provides numerous examples of the differing perspectives which impact on the student's experience. While this phenomenon is not in itself surprising, the size and frequency of the discrepancies were greater than I would have expected. While this has caused me much concern, these findings will hopefully encourage other teachers to consider the extent to which their reality is shared by their students. If the students do not share our view of the problem then they are unlikely to share our view of its solution. If they do not acknowledge the same difficulties then they will have no motivation to address them. An increased focus on accessing the perceptions of those whom we teach is clearly desirable. There would appear to be the need to include at induction stage a great deal of exploratory work with the objective of identifying shared aims and areas of discrepancy. Currently, student learner agreements are focused on objectives and teaching programmes but there is little scope to include or formalise work in relation to areas where there are significant discrepancies.

In addition, there is often little attention paid to the views of parents/carers in relation to what they would like their sons or daughters to learn. In my college, while reviews are held twice each year, they are retrospective. I would like to get to a stage where we sit down with students and their carers at the beginning of the course and invite each of them to specify learning objectives. While this is currently done in relation to the formal programme, I think the focus needs to be narrowed in order to personalise the objectives to a greater degree. I suspect that increased involvement, at the beginning of the course, would result in higher levels of participation and support from the carers throughout the year. Discrepancies in expectations would also be

highlighted at a stage when it is possible to do something about them. Significantly it would widen ownership of the process and of its outcomes.

In relation to those behaviours seen as undesirable, I am still unhappy about the use of terms such as ‘deficit’ which reduce the perceived problems to a lack or weakness which can be ‘treated’ in some way. We must also avoid the assumption that the individual must want to change. As this report suggests, this may not always be the case. What is important, I believe, is that individuals have a right :

- ◆ to know about their behaviour, about its causes, its effects and about the responses of others to it
- to make a decision based on this knowledge which is about the extent to which they want to change and
- to access appropriate training and support in order to make the desired changes a reality.

In short, they have a right to more honesty, than would appear to be the case at present.

When failure appears unavoidable, or a challenge insurmountable, students in this study, frequently adopted a range of avoidance and withdrawal strategies. Further progress, in that particular area, was then no longer possible. The only classes in which such behaviours were not witnessed, in this study, were the drama sessions where students could actually achieve success and perform better than the staff. These classes also provided the students with the opportunity to perform in public, have their efforts recognised (rewarded) and take on a role which was not about having a disability. The motivation to be part of this was perhaps greater than the motivation to avoid failure. If this is so, the challenge for teachers is to find activities and goals which motivate students to the extent that they will risk failure. They also need to help students learn to manage negative feedback in ways which are not self-destructive. At the same time, they must be encouraged to accept the part they themselves play in ‘unsuccessful’ situations and to learn from the experiences. The personal histories outlined in this project all suggest frequent and intense experience of rejection and ineffectiveness and it is within this context that we must plan and perform

our work.

As teachers, we also need to be more aware of how our own behaviour impacts on that of the students. Data recorded in this study suggest that, faced with the wrath of a tutor, students engaged in a number of emotional and behavioural responses that served to protect themselves from pain. This would be expected in any setting. Although there were a number of team teaching situations throughout the week, staff did not use this experience as a means of discussing, and increasing awareness of, the interactions which were taking place. I think this represents wasted opportunities in terms of analysing the teaching/learning process and identifying the most appropriate means of helping each individual. The introduction of this type of discussion at team meetings would, I believe, be extremely productive.

In terms of further research, there is a clear need to look more closely at *teaching teams in the context of groupthink and team/organisation ethos*. It is perhaps inevitable that well-established teams will begin to operate on the basis of shared assumptions. Students with serious learning disabilities are not likely to challenge policies and practices and staff teams must take on the difficult challenge of regularly subjecting their own work to critical analysis. A lack of complaints from this group of students does not indicate that all is well, simply that the students are not complaining about it.

While there is a significant amount of theory in relation to coping mechanisms and behaviours, I found relatively little specifically related to people with severe learning difficulties. Further exploration of behaviours as coping strategies, within this population, would be of value. I suspect that there is reason to look more closely at how people with severe learning difficulties cope and react to stress and it is perhaps significant in itself that little work has been done in this area.

The starting point for curriculum design must then be the identification of what is meaningful and motivating for each student and the optimum level at which they can work. Tutors, when faced with difficult behaviours, might usefully ask themselves what they have done to prompt the undesirable

activity. This would represent a marked change in both attitude and approach and might result in staff finding a way forward on more occasions. We must be more willing to accept responsibility for the impact of our actions on others who are perhaps less well equipped to articulate their objections.

In relation to teaching strategies, the findings suggest that, choosing not to respond to behaviours viewed as undesirable, is ineffective and potentially damaging. There is also the suggestion that those students presenting the most 'challenging' behaviours are often those who are most motivated to be accepted and do well. The others are possibly more likely to settle for a repertoire of safe, survival tactics. In working with students therefore, it is important not to assume that they are unmotivated because they are behaving in a way which the teaching staff find unacceptable. It is also important to recognise the purpose of the behaviour and to offer the student alternative means to the same end if that is appropriate. If we begin with these priorities, it will change, significantly, the way we respond to students.

There are clearly staff development issues related to working with any group or individual students who present us with behaviour which we find challenging. We need expert advice on understanding and extending our repertoire of responses. In my own college, through the partnership with the local social services unit, we have ready access to the social work and psychology services and this has proved extremely beneficial to all concerned. However, we are still in a situation where class sizes of less than 12 are not acceptable to management and, clearly, more intensive work in this setting is just not feasible. This reflects perhaps a lack of awareness on the part of college management and a concern with the need for the course to be financially viable.

In relation to student behaviours, this study would suggest the need for further research into the goals and social targets of people with severe learning difficulties. We should not assume that they are all motivated by the need to become full, working members of the local community. This is not a homogenous group and each student has different hopes, dreams and

ambitions. While recognising that not all students do want to change, acquire new social skills and be more 'included' in society there are, of course, those who do. Given the concerns outlined above, it is important to consider alternative approaches to social skills intervention. These are necessitated by the apparent lack of success to date and informed by the data and literature cited in this report.

Social Skills Training

In this study, the need to extend social skills interventions to take account of individual choice, attributional patterns and the development of emotional intelligence has been highlighted. The implications of this for teachers are many. Firstly, there is need to re-examine the curriculum in order to assess opportunities within it for **social cognitive development**. By this, I am referring to the development of those mental representations and processes underlying social perception, social judgement and social influence.

Bandura (1986) suggests that individuals have five basic human capabilities: symbolizing, forethought, vicarious learning, self-regulation, and self-reflection, which they use in order to initiate, regulate, and sustain their own behaviour (see appendix 20 for summary). As educators, one of our key tasks is to provide planned and graded opportunities for the development and use of these capabilities. We cannot assume that awareness and competence develop incidentally and through ordinary daily living and social interactions. Children with severe learning difficulties are less likely to acquire knowledge in this way and so it is probable that many adults come to college with learning needs in this domain. Identification and assessment of these needs must become a primary concern and our aim must be to make the adults more consciously aware of the mental states and processes which result in the behaviours identified in this project.

An important component of prescriptive intervention is the classification of social skills 'deficits' beyond a simple accounting of frequency and social validity. Gresham and Elliott (1984) have developed a scheme that categorises the origins of social skills deficits into four areas: skill deficits;

performance deficits, self-control skill deficits, and self-control performance deficits. Skill deficits are observed when the skill was never acquired or when important components of it are missing. Performance deficits are present when the adult has the skill but use is infrequently, perhaps because the social environment does not reinforce its use or, as is suggested in this research, reinforces inappropriate alternatives.

These types of deficit each require a different approach to intervention. Skill deficits require work which focuses first on the acquisition of important skills followed by efforts to generalise their use into other settings. Performance deficits, according to Gresham and Elliot (1984), require only reinforcement and generalisation. This is where I feel a skills approach has serious limitations. Where a skill has been learned, but is not used, the important intervention, in my view, relates to understanding why the individual concerned chooses to behave in another way. The cognitive aspect ie. gaining an insight into the reasons for, and implications, of certain types of behaviour, is vitally important to him/her in this respect.

Where emotional responses appear to interfere with the acquisition of social skills (self-control skill deficit) or with the use of existing skills (self-control performance deficit), Gresham and Elliott (1984) suggest that the arousal response must be ameliorated, perhaps through desensitisation, anger replacement training or self-instruction/management. These interventions may take place prior to, or paired with, the use of appropriate interventions for the skills deficits. My concern with this approach is that it does not necessarily involve the agreement or understanding of the individual regarding the behaviour deemed undesirable. An important first step would involve the exploration of possible factors resulting in the emotional response and a joint identification of the behaviours selected for change. There are obvious links here with Bandura's regulation and reflection competencies. Clearly, the level of awareness and understanding achieved by each individual would vary considerably but I do not agree that, because some adults would gain perhaps only a fairly 'superficial' insight, this justifies not doing the work at all.

Another cognitive-emotional variable that has received limited attention in the social skills literature is attributional style. The first important application of **attribution theory** to social skills training could occur in the initial assessment (Carlyon, 1997). While it is important to determine specific skills that may be lacking, incomplete or under-used, it is just as important to evaluate how the individual's experiences may have affected her/his representations of social events. Adults who hold internal, stable and uncontrollable attributions for social failures are not likely to believe that trained skills will be effective in changing their status. An assessment of attributional style could be included as part of a multi-method, functional analysis of students' social behaviour. If self-reports of maladaptive attributions are consistent with direct observations and others' ratings, then an attributional approach may be added as part of the intervention (Carlyon, 1997). Initial assessment could be followed by frequent, less formal assessments to identify attitudinal changes and inform the use of cognitive-behavioural interventions specific to attributional style. Carlyon (1997) provides a short summary of assessment instruments developed for this purpose and a more detailed analysis of the application of attributional theory to social skills training.

Additional research is needed in order to develop and verify attributional assessment methods, test the efficacy of related intervention techniques, and investigate how they can most feasibly be integrated into existing social skills training. Developmental issues must also be explored. Younger children and some adults with severe learning difficulties may not have the memory or cognitive skills to respond appropriately (Sobol and Earn, 1985). Given that much of the social skills training occurs with adults who have learning disabilities, the efficacy of attribution-based techniques must be tested with different groups without assuming that they will all respond similarly. It would appear that attribution theory has a contribution to make to cognitive-behavioural social skills training. The challenge now is to build an empirical link between the diverse findings concerning social attributions and the actual practice of attributional and/or cognitive mediation retraining within, or alongside, social skills training.

The relatively new body of research in relation to **emotional intelligence** is, I think, of particular significance to people with learning difficulties. I would like to see a great deal more research into this area and the development of appropriate programmes designed to enable individuals to acquire skills and knowledge in this area. My own study suggests that many of the adults involved have had little opportunity to access the experiences necessary for the development of emotional intelligence. We must consider the harm we are doing in over-protecting children with disabilities and look at ways forward in relation to changing practice. The role of parents in relation to social development is central and we need to look at how these parents can be helped to consider the issues involved while their children are still young.

Goleman (1996) suggests that topics, seen as essential in relation to emotional literacy development, include self-awareness, empathy, managing emotions, taking responsibility and handling relationships. These 'core skills', he argues could be taught through existing classes and, as such, could become, essentially, an invisible social and emotional competence programme. My own view would be that success is more likely where such training becomes an integral part of the student's overall experience and is extended into counselling and disciplinary procedures. Clearly, courses in subjects such as Drama lend themselves to more structured interventions and a mix of the formal and informal is likely to be most effective. Staff involved will, however, need training in relation to emotional intelligence theory and methods of weaving this approach seamlessly into the curriculum or offering the course as a stand- alone unit.

Most importantly, as teachers, we must not penalise students for failing to demonstrate skills they have had no opportunity to acquire. Moreover, there are a number of moral and ethical concerns around the current approaches to social skills training. Staff must ask themselves questions related to why they would want to eliminate behaviours among the student group. They must also consider the extent to which they have any right to dictate what

constitutes acceptable behaviour to anyone. This has serious implications for staff working on a range of courses because it questions fundamental assumptions about the role of teachers. I am not suggesting that we should no longer attempt to deal with behaviours that are disruptive, anti-social or even dangerous. I do feel however, that we need to distinguish between harmless, nuisance behaviours and those of a more serious nature. Where students do want to change their behaviours and develop new skills I have attempted in this report to offer a number of suggestions regarding possible approaches and strategies. I suspect there is no single best way and that, in choosing an approach, account should be taken of the setting, the students and the level of staff expertise.

Multidisciplinary Approach

Currently, a major problem is that the responsibility for social skills intervention does not fall clearly into any one service area in the way that physiotherapy or speech and language development does. It cuts across boundaries and is peripheral to the work of people like teachers, social workers and speech therapists. Since no-one has a direct responsibility for it, it is work that is often not carried out at all. The need for a carefully co-ordinated, cross-curriculum, cross-discipline approach is apparent.

This project, like many before it, suggests clearly the need for parents and professionals to work in partnership in relation to identifying and providing the best service possible for people with disabilities. My own research, however, also suggests that even where there are clear partnerships there is often no agreed perception or plan of action. In my own area we have a unique relationship with the local Health and Social Services trust. We are contracted to provide a service for them in the same way as a number of other private local day care agencies. Transport to and from college is provided by the Trust and a range of specialised services is available to the students on campus. While the practical benefits of the partnership are obvious, there are difficulties in relation to the absence of an agreed rationale and selection procedure for the course.

There is also some evidence to suggest that the students are perhaps the most minor players in the whole process. The formation of strategies and processes to involve a range of 'interested parties' is only the starting point. There is a danger that this becomes an end in itself. More work is needed to develop strategies which enable students, parents and professionals to work collaboratively on an equal basis and in the best interests of the student.

Personal Evaluation

Completion of this research has been a long and often frustrating experience for me. The focus of the work has changed and evolved as a result of ongoing literature reviews and data emerging from the project. This has produced its own challenges in terms of time and organisation and I have often longed to find myself on solid ground rather than on constantly shifting sands. It has been incredibly unsatisfying to discover, fairly late on in the process, so many avenues of further research which are of such interest but which I have had neither the time nor the resources to follow up.

In addition, I have discovered areas of weakness in my own approach to the work which have resulted perhaps in the loss or absence of relevant data. The use of observation as a research tool is an example of such weaknesses. I invested a great deal of time to obtain very few results and then discovered that much more could be achieved with a different approach. This was demoralising. It was also challenging at times to view my own approach to the students in the light of new reading or interview data. I was not as good at my job as I had thought! Hopefully, though, I have succeeded already in addressing some of the areas which merit attention.

The experience has by no means however, been without its rewards. I have significantly increased both the depth and breadth of my knowledge in the subject areas concerned. As a direct result, my perceptions of, and attitude to, the students have also changed. I am now more aware of power issues and give more consideration to the why and how of my teaching.

There has also been an observable impact on other members of the course

team. Throughout the period of the research, I have been engaged in ongoing dialogue with other tutors and staff. As a direct result, these staff have begun to question the approaches adopted by the team and to think more about the students and their curriculum. I have regularly been approached by classroom assistants wanting to share with me their thoughts or ideas about particular students or about the appropriateness of the taught programme. Very recently I overheard one of these support staff expressing concern that, as a team, we were evaluating one student in a particular way without any real foundation for such an evaluation. She was asking the course tutor about the possibility of having meetings to discuss issues like this.

Finally, I have always felt that the success or otherwise of this project would depend greatly on its potential for practical application. To this end, I recently set aside some staff development days to look at the possibility of drawing up a learning programme which would reflect the findings and recommendations from this work. In terms of selecting a vehicle for this programme, I looked at existing subject areas and was able to identify the drama classes as being the most popular and the most accessible, particularly for students with multiple disabilities. The outcome of my work is the production of a one year 'key skills in drama' programme which is accessible to any student regardless of additional impairment. I am hoping to have the course validated by the Open College Network in the autumn and to have the first students complete it in June next year. If this programme is successful, I would intend, next year, to identify other areas of the curriculum that could usefully be adapted to become more suitable for our students.

This type of activity, I believe, speaks volumes for the notion of 'teacher as researcher'. Ownership of my findings has directly 'obligated' me to do something with them. It is unfortunate, then, that research activities are often not considered a part of the teacher's role. I suspect the content and delivery of curriculum would be that much richer and more rewarding for everyone if it were.

Appendices

Appendix One	Talkabout Worksheets
Appendix Two	Semi-structured Interviews
Appendix Three	Self-assessment Scale
Appendix Four	Appearance Activity
Appendix Five	Feelings about the Week
Appendix Six	Labels people give Me
Appendix Seven	Likes and Dislikes about Me
Appendix Eight	Observation Summary
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Appendix Twelve	Life Story (extract)
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Appendix Fourteen	Group Interview (extracts)
Appendix Fifteen	Life Story (extracts)
Appendix Sixteen	Group Interview (extracts)
Appendix Seventeen	Group Interview (extracts)
Appendix Eighteen	Group Interview (extracts)
Appendix Nineteen	Group Interview (extracts)
Appendix Twenty	SCT – Personal Capabilities

Personal Development Worksheets



ASSESSMENT

NAME Angela

DATE



What are you like at the following?

	never good	not very good	quite good	very good	I don't know
1 Talking to a friend when we are on our own				✓	
2 Talking to friends in a group				✓	
3 Talking to someone in authority, eg. a policeman, a boss			✓		
4 Talking to new people that I meet				✓	
5 Listening to people that are talking to me				✓	
6 Asking questions, eg. if I don't understand something				✓	
7 Answering questions, eg. if someone asks me directions				✓	
8 Keeping still and not fidgeting too much				✓	
9 Speaking clearly and not mumbling				✓	
10 Talking or explaining something to a group of people, eg. in a meeting				✓	

COMPLETED BY

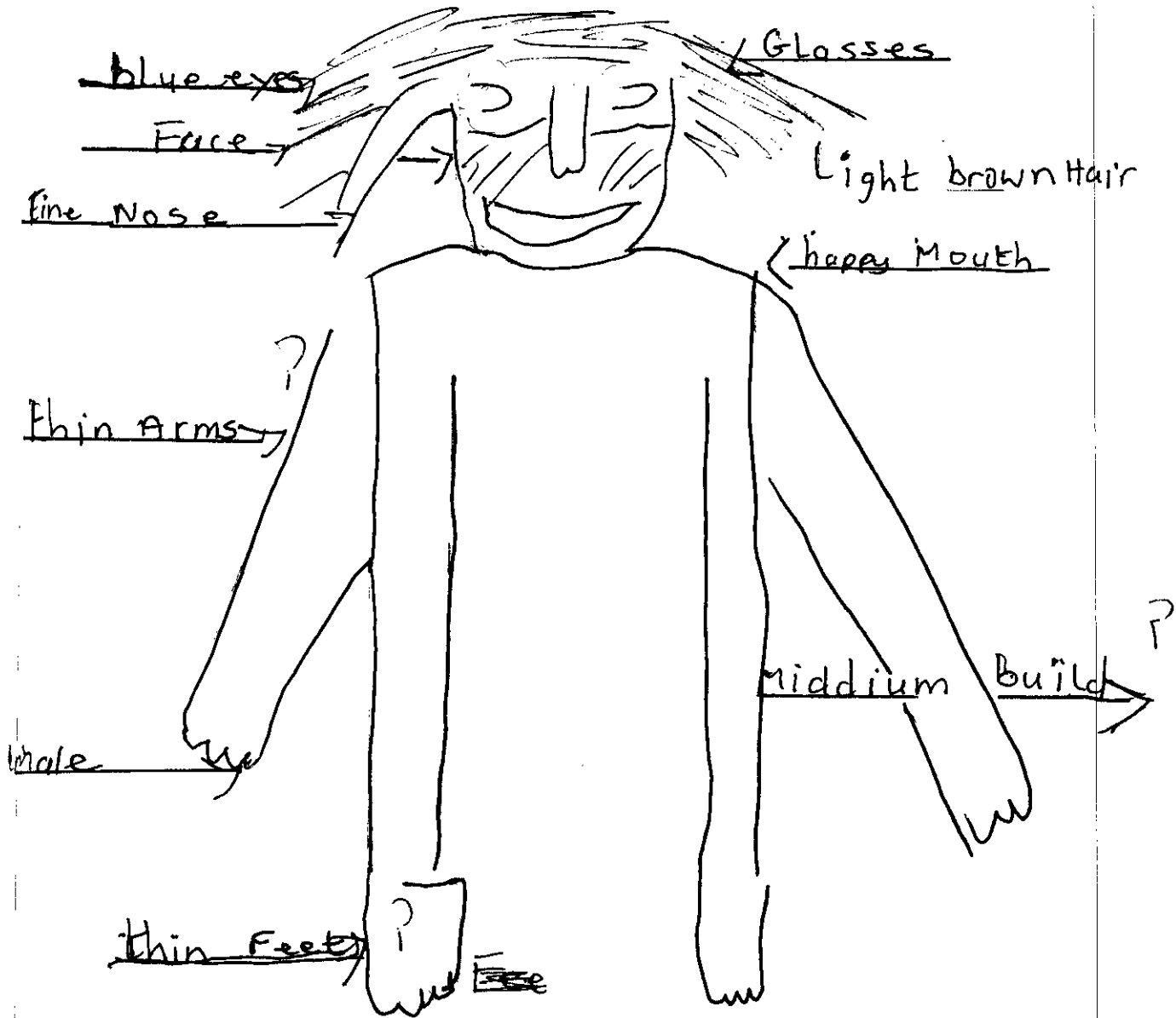
ME & YOU

NAME Michelle McKrown

DATE 23/9/97

What do I look like?

Draw a picture of yourself and label all your physical characteristics.





ME & YOU

NAME

DATE 4 November



My feelings about this week



What did I do well today?



What did I not do so well today?

		
Monday	Did well at writing	Nothing
Tuesday	Talk about my family	
Wednesday	I went to Saw Shop	
Thursday	I went to see Michael	
Friday	I went to work shop	
Saturday	I went to Peter Pan	
Sunday	I went to movie	

ME & YOU

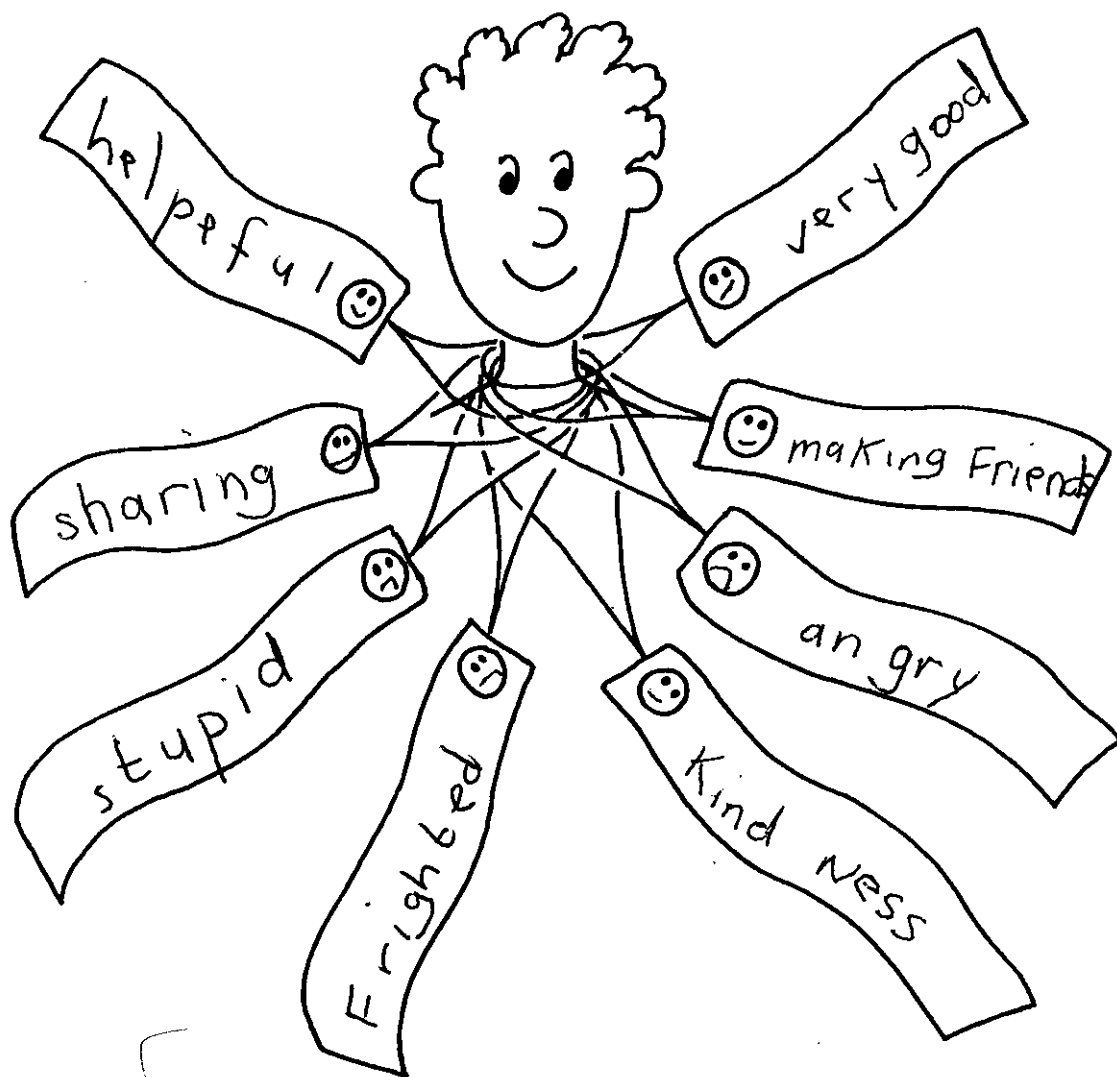
NAME

Sandra

DATE

Labels that have been given to me

Do you like them? 😊 Or do you not like them? ☹️



One of the nicest things someone has ever said about me is...





ME & YOU

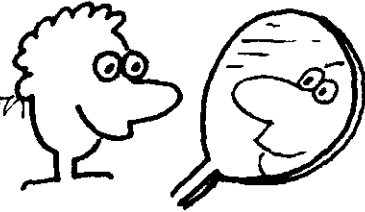
NAME

DATE

What do I like and not like about myself?

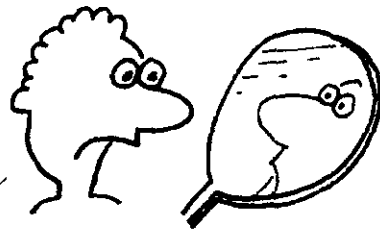
1 What do I like about myself?

~~I am~~ ^{I am} a very nice person

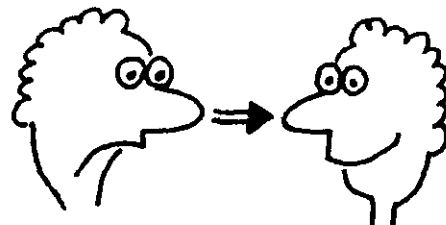


2 What do I not like about myself?

No one cares for me.
Some people don't like
you.



3 One thing I'd like to change
about myself is ...



Semi-structured interview schedule

- 1. Can you recall your initial impressions of the student group? What were your feelings about working with them?**
- 2. Can we talk about the experience of mixing socially with adults who have severe learning difficulties?**
- 3. Are there aspects of the students' behaviour that you personally find irritating or unacceptable? Or things that you would prefer the students not to do?**
- 4. Why do you think these behaviours occur?**
- 5. What about the positive side? Are there aspects of this work you particularly enjoy or value?**
- 6. Would you consider any of the students, or any adult with severe learning difficulties, to be a friend?**
- 7. What needs to happen to facilitate better communication between adults with severe learning difficulties and their non-disabled peers?**

(adapted for individual use with college staff and volunteers)

Self-assessment rating scale : collated responses (24)

What are you like at the following? (majority response was in very good column on 9/10 items)

never good not very good quite good very good don't know

<i>Talking to a friend on your own</i>			8	15	1
<i>Talking to friends in a group</i>		5	3	14	
<i>Talking to someone in authority</i>	4	4	8	6	2
<i>Talking to new people</i>	2	2	3	10	7
<i>Listening to people</i>		1	5	16	2
<i>Asking questions</i>		5	6	9	2
<i>Answering questions</i>	1	7	3	10	2
<i>Not fidgeting too much</i>		1	4	19	
<i>Speaking clearly</i>	1	2	6	15	
<i>Explaining things</i>	1	3	8	9	3

Personal Appearance Activity

collated responses (24 students)

What do I look like? (Students were asked to draw a picture of themselves and label all their physical characteristics)

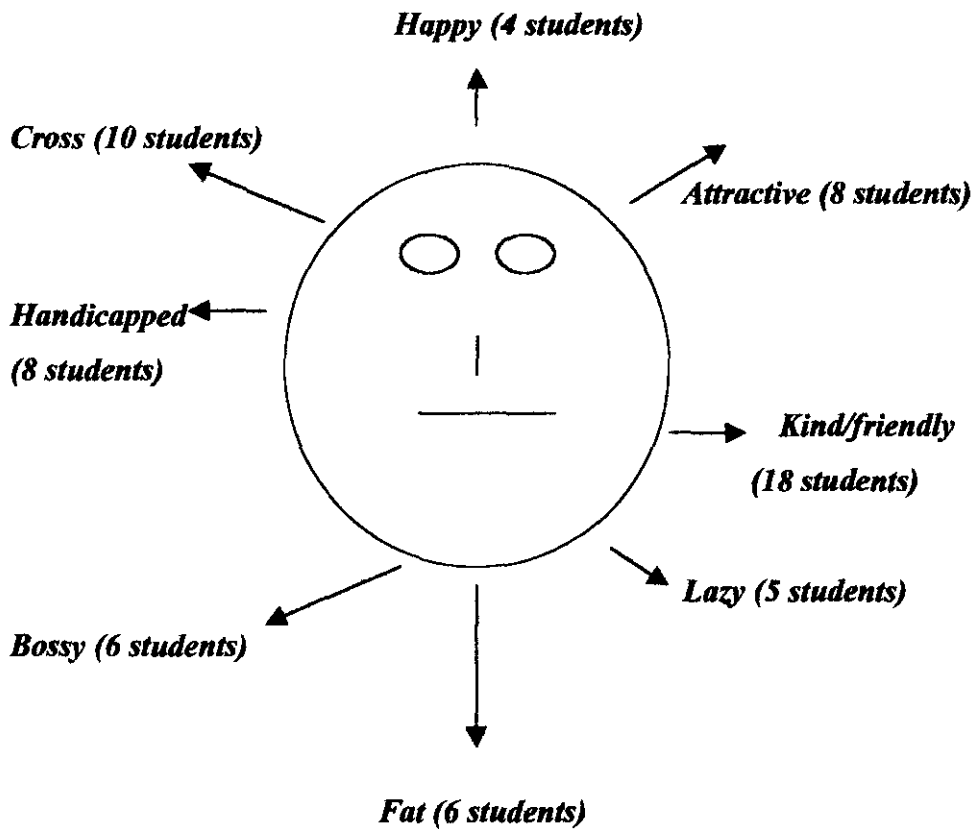
- 6 students did not know the colour of their hair
- 7 students with serious weight problems described themselves as thin
- 6 students did a drawing with no body
- 2 students gave themselves four legs
- 19 students were unable to describe themselves accurately

Feelings about the Week (sample responses)

	What did I do well to-day?	What went not so well?
Monday	Visited Helped at home Good at college	
Tuesday	Went for a walk Talked Homework	
Wednesday	Played football Went to drama Used computers	Used bad language
Thursday	Gateway club Acting Shared my lunch	
Friday	Went to café Was kind Made the bed	
Saturday	Housework Went to the market Helped mum	Argued
Sunday	Mass Washed dishes Played a game	

Note: Ten students were able to complete this task. Only two examples of 'undesirable' behaviour were provided.

LABELS THAT HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO ME



Note: 24 students completed this exercise. The results were collated as above.

What do I like and not like about myself?

<p>What do I like about myself? (7 responses)</p> <p>I'm friendly I'm kind I like my life study I'm a very nice person I speak to people well I like my reflection My personality is caring</p>
<p>What do I not like about myself? (4 responses)</p> <p>I have bad moods (3 students) I am getting into trouble I like everything about myself (3 students)</p>
<p>One thing I'd like to change about myself is</p> <p>(7responses)</p> <p>I need more manners My attitude Listening Feelings at home Other people to like me more Going out and meeting friends Keeping out of rows</p>

Note: 17 students attempted this exercise but only 7 were able to complete it. The others had serious difficulties in understanding what was required of them. In this respect it was a very flawed exercise.

Observation Summary

Name	Unstructured Periods Break times	Structured Sessions (classes)
John	6/10 sessions: no contact with others 3/10 sessions: approached staff (ignored or answered briefly) 1/10 session: spoke sentence to other student	5/10 sessions: reprimanded by staff 8/10 sessions: no contact with other students 3/10 sessions: sought staff approval
Bernadette	10/10 sessions: talked incessantly to other students with little response 6/10 sessions: gave orders to others	6/10 sessions: took group leader role 4/10 sessions: reprimanded by staff for demanding behaviour 7/10 sessions: sought staff approval
Briege	8/10 sessions: chatted to other students 6/10 sessions: whispered to students to avoid staff hearing 2/10 sessions: no contact with others	3/10 sessions: asked staff for help 5/10 sessions: answered correctly after prompting by staff
Niamh	7/10 sessions: no contact with others 2/10 sessions: asked staff for information 1/10 sessions: gave staff item of personal news (brief response)	6/10 sessions: sought staff approval 2/10 sessions: tearful following minor reprimand from staff 6/10 sessions: asked staff for help
Martina	5/10 sessions: responded to orders from Bernadette 3/10 sessions: no contact with others 4/10 sessions: spoke briefly to staff ('tolerated' briefly)	5/10 sessions: sought staff approval 7/10 sessions: praised by staff
Sandra	4/10 sessions: spoke briefly to staff 4/10 sessions: no contact with others 5/10 sessions: chatted to other students	6/10 sessions: reprimanded by staff for failure to follow instructions 7/10 sessions: sought staff approval
Ivan	8/10 sessions: no contact with others 2/10 sessions: asked staff for help (told to wait)	10/10 sessions: demanded staff attention 6/10 sessions: reprimanded for demanding behaviour
Jim	7/10 sessions: chatted to other students 6/10 sessions: chatted to staff ('tolerated' briefly)	8/10 sessions: chatted to staff 5/10 sessions: reprimanded for chatting 4/10 sessions: sought staff approval

Personal Information Sheet (Sample)

Name: Bernadette M.

Age: 18

Sex: Female

Living Arrangements: I live with my mummy who is called Bernie and my brother who is Brendan.

Previous Schools: The first school I went to was K. House it was terrible for me. I wasn't getting treated properly I couldn't wait to get home from school all the time. Everyday I was coming home with sore heads and cuts and browses all the time as soon as I came home I went straight to my room and cried my eyes out because I was always getting bullied. Then when I was thirteen years old I changed school I went to Saint Marys I got on better at that school I made some friends and I was starting to get Educated properly.

Hobbies/Interests: My hobbies are playing football, going swimming and listening to my CDs such as Rave, steps, Bwitched, Spice Girls, Aqua, the three lions, The Manchester united song and the full monty. I like using my weights a well so that people could call me my nick name witch is Muscles.

Life Goals: I would like a job as either a secretary or doing leisure and tourism

Appendix Ten

Students involved in group and individual interviews

Name	Sex	Age	Disability	Schools Attended	Hobbies	Life Goals
Bernadette	F	18	autism/s.l.d	Special (m.l.d.) Mainstream (unit)	Football, Swimming Music Weights	Job as a Secretary or in a leisure centre
Jim	M	26	s.l.d. visual impairment	Special (m.l.d.)	Swimming Pool Football	Radio D.J.
Briege	F	21	s.l.d. mental health problem	Special (m.l.d.)	Pets Music Dancing	Marry a rich man
John	M	32	s.l.d. (Down's Syndrome) speech impairment	Special (s.l.d.)	Football Disco dancing Drama	Champion dancer or Reporter
Sandra	F	33	s.l.d. (Down's Syndrome) mobility problems	Special (m.l.d.) Special (s.l.d.)	Music Bed making Postcards	Win lottery Get away Get a boyfriend
Ivan	M	30	s.l.d.(autistic spectrum disorder)	Special (s.l.d.)	Work with tyres	Job in a garage
Niamh	F	20	s.l.d. (Rubenstein-Taybi syndrome)	Mainstream (special unit)	Reading	Job in a library
Martina	F	23	s.l.d. epilepsy	Mainstream Special (s.l.d.)	Football	Win the lottery

GROUP INTERVIEW 2

Participants: Bernadette, Briega, Niamh, John, Sandra, Martina.

Topic: Choice and Control (selected extracts)

.....

Bernadette: Well, I make half the decisions for myself and my mother makes half the others. I decide what I wear and what I eat and sometimes where I go on a Friday night when my mummy says "No, you're not going out", and I say to my mummy "Wise up, why can I not go out?", and she says it's not me, it is me she can trust, it's other people, like men takin' advantage.

Sandra: My mother makes all the decisions but if she gets stuck she comes to me, asks me for extra help, for ideas for me.

Briega: My mummy makes the decisions about what clothes I wear....I'm allowed to eat anything I want but it's clothes.

Martina: I make all my own decisions but I don't like the way I dress. I make my own decisions about everything.

.....

Interviewer: You've mentioned clothes. Who picks them?

Martina: My mummy and daddy buy my clothes for me no, I'm not allowed to go with them Sometimes I don't like what they bring me.

Bernadette: I buy all my clothes myself. Nobody tells me what to wear.

John: Sometimes my parents help me and sometimes the staff.

Sandra: I get my clothes sent over from America .. I have relatives there you see. I'm expecting another parcel soon.

.....

Interviewer: What about money? Who controls their own money?

Martina: I do. I can count money.

Interviewer: Do you lift your own benefits or does someone do that for you?

Martina: My mummy does. She keeps my money for me and I ask her if I need money.

Sandra: Well, my mother gives me money if I need it.

Bernadette: I lift my benefit every fortnight and I give my mummy half and I keep half ... to save up for clothes and presents and things.

John: I get my own money in the hostel. I get two or three pounds when I'm coming to college and the staff say to try and save some of it.

Briega: I get my benefit and some of that goes to the car, my daddy's car and I get some.

.....

Interviewer: What about friends and people you go out with?

Bernadette: I pick my own friends but my mummy doesn't let me go to the disco with them.

Briege: My mummy says I haven't got any friends. ... well, none near me ... I never go out, just for a run in the car with my daddy sometimes.

Martina: I have loads of friends near where I live I'm not allowed to go to discos or anything, not even with my sister, because of my epilepsy.

Sandra: I have a friend in the hostel and I go there every other weekend to help out and play the piano for them. We go out in a group if there's a group going.

John: Yes, I go out to the Gateway club and the staff take us in the minibus.

.....

Interviewer: Bedtime. Who decides?

Bernadette: My mummy makes me go to bed at half ten during the week but I'm allowed to stay up at weekends.

Sandra: 11 o'clock sharp. That's me My mummy tells me.

Briege: I can go when I like.

John: The staff say 11 o'clock. It makes me very angry sometimes when I want to stay up later in my room.

Martina: I just go when I'm tired.

.....

Interviewer: What happens when someone makes a decision for you that you don't like? What do you do?

Martina: I go to my room and ignore them and I won't go if I don't want to.

Sandra: Well, my mother wanted me to go to a party and she was saying "Why won't you go?" and I went to my room and wouldn't go.

Briege: Well, I would start shouting and we would have an argument.

John: I get very angry ... sometimes my parents tell me off and sometimes the staff and I am like this ready to explode.

Appendix Twelve

Life Story Book (extract)

I am very happy being me. I can do so many things and I am learning all the time. I can clean the house for my mum. and I keep my room tidy. I can ride my bicycle. but I am not very safe on the road. I ride in around our house. I can use the telephone and most evenings I ring my friends for good gossip. I Love to dance and I listen to music. there are some things I cant do. or find hard to do. I cannot cook or read a recipe. I would like to be able to sing and take part in a Karaoke.

GROUP INTERVIEW 1

Participants: Bernadette, Briege, Niamh, John, Sandra, Martina, Jim.

Topic: Schooldays (selected extracts)

.....
Interviewer: Overall, do you have happy memories of your time at school?

Niamh: No, I got kicked for no reason in the girls' toilets ... it was at the Christmas concert I was very upset. They had no need to kick me. I was just going to the toilet.

Interviewer: Why do you think anyone would do a thing like that?

Briege: Maybe they didn't like her.

Niamh: No, that's not it. It was just because I was going to the toilet. They shouldn't have done that just because I was going to the toilet.

.....
Briege: Well, I got thumped too at school And called names ... like 'spastic' and 'duh' and 'nits' and 'fleas'. I couldn't tell my mum. It would just have made it worse. There was a crowd of them They put drawing pins on a chair and pushed me onto it. They didn't like me for no reason.

Interviewer: Can you think now of any reason why that might have happened?

Briege: 'Cause you're different. When I was three I got meningitis and then I got the medical condition of an eight year old child. That's what I have now. I had bad, aggressive behaviour. I got violent and nobody could control me.

Jim: I liked school alright. At the primary they sent for my mum because I wasn't keeping up with the rest. So I went to K. school and it was good there but you had to leave when you were 11. I wanted to go to B. or D. but my mum said no so I went to A. I never did any work there. We just worked in the garden or went out in the bus every day. I never learned anything.

.....
Sandra: I had lots of friends .. they were very good people there.

Interviewer: So, nobody treated you as different?

Sandra: Well, maybe a slight difference. You see I was sent to the hall to be converted

Interviewer: Converted?

Sandra: What's the word? There was a man with a big ring on his finger ...

Interviewer: Are you talking about Holy Communion?

Sandra: Yes, anyway, the teacher said I was to go to the hall but when I went the man said he wasn't having me in his class ... but I had lots of friends and we used to knit in the bus, my friend and me. I got on very well.

Interviewer: You left after a short time. Did you want to leave?

Sandra: I didn't know I'd left. They didn't tell me. I felt a bit ashamed of myself.

John: I did very well at school. I was at the primary.

Interviewer: Yes, but you spent much longer in the G. Community, didn't you? What was it like....being a boarder?

John: I was very upset. I went there when I was six. I was crying and then my mum was crying. They were very upset.

Interviewer: You moved to Downpatrick later on. Was that your choice?

John: Not really. I liked to stay on at G. but my mum wanted me to move. I didn't really mind.

.....

Bernadette: I hated K. I got bullied the whole time. I went in a taxi, collected at half seven and I didn't get back till six.

Jim: I went in the bus. Because I lived near the driver I was first lifted, at a quarter past seven.

.....

Interviewer: At college, how do you think you're treated?

Bernadette: As adults.

Briege: Yes, adults 'cause when I went home my mummy said, "Well, where's your note?" and I said, "Mummy, I'm at college. We don't get notes."

Bernadette: My mummy always asks for notes too. I tell her we're too old for notes but she keeps asking.

Interviewer: Are there times when we don't treat you as adults?

Silence

Interviewer: Briege, you're smiling. Can you give me an example of when staff treat you like as a child.

Briege: Yes, when I get on silly and act stupid, that's like a child.

Interviewer: O.K. So that's a time when you act like a child but are there times when we treat you like a child?

Briege: To tell you the honest truth, see, when I go home, I act like a child the whole time and get on stupid....

Bernadette: So do I sometimes, when my mummy won't let me out and I keep on moaning at her.

GROUP INTERVIEW 4

Participants: Bernadette, Briege, Niamh, John, Sandra, Ivan, Jim.

Topic: People in your life (selected extracts)
.....

Interviewer:and what about the person you would most like to be like?

Bernadette: Sometimes I get the feeling there's stacks of people I would like to be like. I would like to be Rebel out of the Gladiators because she's tall and she's tanned and it makes you jealous and my two cousins because they're very good looking and they're good footballers.

Jim: Not Jerry Kelly anyway. I have a good one for you, George Jones, because I could do his job on the radio, and all the voices and acts Sadie ... and Paddy F., I would like to be him, because he owns three shops.

Ivan: Like somebody who works in a garage .. like Robert who works there.

Sandra: Bill Clinton, because of the American language.

John: I'd like to be a millionaire Somebody famous like a pop group, the Spice Girls.

Briege: Madonna, because of the way she sings and the clothes she wears, and I'd like to be like my sister because she's married and there's another baby on the way.
.....

Interviewer: In real life, what do you think you'll end up doing?

Briege: I'd like to work with wee ones but I don't think so.

Jim: I could see me on Radio Ulster. I could get a wee job there. I know a whole lot of them.

Sandra: A musician, I think.

John: A champion dancer, yes, or I could work on a newspaper, in London.

Bernadette: I'd like a job in an office.

Life Story Book Extracts (copied as originally written)

Niamh

I am Niamh
I am twtwenty years old
I am Roasmunds friend
I am Good at walking
I am doing My English Speaking board Exam
I am happy
I am very good At reading books
I am good At playing bingo
I am also good At tiding the house
I am good at giving people Christmas cards At Christmas
I am very good At writing Stuff for The Newsletter too
I am good At doing everything for myself
I am very good At joining in With Bettes group
I am also good at Computers on Wednesdays
I am good at taking photographs
I am good At playing basketball

John

iam yung man
iam a reporter
iam a writer
iam a reader
iam fit
iam a runner
iam good lively gay
iam vary strong
iam the great fan of man united

GROUP INTERVIEW 4

Participants: Bernadette, Briege, Niamh, John, Sandra, Ivan, Jim.

Topic: People in your life (selected extracts)

.....

Interviewer: Who, in college, is most like you, do you think?

Ivan: Leo, the bus driver, because he has a Mercedes bus.

Briege: Bernadette, because we were friends at Killard.

Bernadette: Well, we did go to the same school but we have another thing in common, we both have epilepsy.

Interviewer: Briege, I didn't think you had epilepsy.

Briege: No, I don't.

Bernadette: I heard you saying one time you had epilepsy.

Briege: When I was five.

Bernadette: I'm like Jim because we went to the same school, and like Martina just because of the epilepsy.

John: I'm like you Bette. You're my tutor.

Sandra: I'd rather have Janette and Bette.

Jim: I think she's like Martina because they went to school together.

Interviewer: Do you think that's right, Sandra?

Sandra: No, because we went to different schools.

Jim: I'm like Bernadette because we went to the same school and Matthew because we support the same team.

.....

Interviewer: Who are you not at all like?

John: Mark. He's not a relation or a friend. He went to his own school, I didn't.

Bernadette: Well, I'm not like Ian because he doesn't do much work. I don't mean to be rude or anything but he went to a special secondary school and I went to a mainstream one.

Briege: I can't think. Aidan, I'd be less like him. He plays pool and snooker and I play five-a-side sometimes.....

Bernadette: She's a bit different. He can be very silly and childish at times but she can get in a bad mood and slams her pencil down. I don't mean to be rude.

GROUP INTERVIEW 6

Participants: Bernadette, Briege, Niamh, Sandra, Martina, Jim.

Topic: Disability (selected extracts)
.....

Interviewer: We've been talking a wee bit about different disabilities. What do we mean by disability?

Bernadette: Well, epilepsy or autism or learning disabilities.

Briege: The ones in wheelchairs, people who can't move. They're worse than us because they can't cope on their own. They can't feed themselves or get up in the morning.

Bernadette: They can't do the things we do, like swimming and exercises.

Sandra: Or go to pubs, like get ready to go out.

Briege: There's three wheelchairs on our bus. K. slabbers a lot and her hands are like this I feel sorry for her. We're all normal and she's not. She's in a wheelchair and she needs help.

Martina: It would be awful to be blind because you would need to have somebody walking beside you.

Bernadette: I would hate to have any of those things. You wouldn't know what was going on.
.....

Interviewer: How do you feel about spending so much time with other people who have disabilities?

Briege: Well, sometimes I'm not in the mood to help. Niamh, she needs help.

Jim: I think Stu is disabled because you can't make out what he says.

Sandra: Anne is disabled because she makes humming noises on the bus.

Bernadette: Well, when my friends would see me in a bus with people like that I thought they would call me 'handicapped' because years ago they called me that.

Jim: It doesn't bother me at all.

GROUP INTERVIEW 3

Participants: Bernadette, Briege, Niamh, Sandra, Martina, Ivan, John.

Topic: Exclusion (selected extracts)
.....

Interviewer: What about jobs? Is it harder for you to get a job than for some other people maybe?

Ivan: Well, I wanted to go to work placement two days a week and Barbara says she has no taxis for me and I was very surprised, very, very disappointed. I look forward to another day at workplace and sometimes there is bother because I just go on too much about it ... and my mother gives me a clout in the ear .. and then I say sorry.

Sandra: I do want a job but the first thing I want is qualifications. Yes, I would have a job in music. I'm doing a practical exam. I can play music. I'd like to work on it.

Bernadette: You need exams in music Sandra. Sometimes it's easy to get a job. It depends on how you get on with people. I was getting on well with the Peter Pan club but the reason I had to leave there was that there's no adults' club so I can't work for them anymore. You need loads of qualifications and you need to get on with people.

Briege: It's hard for me because of my sweat glands. They drip like a tap in my hands. If I'm writing the whole thing is smudged.

John: Well, it's easy anyway. They were delighted with me in the hostel. I was on placement there, where I live. I wish I could get a job.
.....

Interviewer: Have there been any problems on work placements?

Sandra: Bullied! Why? Because Dorothy gave me stuff to do and Shirley gave me stuff to do and then all these students kept coming in.

John: I don't like to say this but I steal something.

Bernadette: Me, complaining.

Niamh: It would be too tiring for me.

GROUP INTERVIEW 5

Participants: Bernadette, Briege, Niamh, Sandra, Martina, Jim, John.

Topic: Important people in our lives (selected extracts)

.....

Interviewer: What about people who matter to us and whose opinion we value. Imagine you have done something dreadful, who is the one person you would not want to find out?

Martina: My mum, because she would say something awful to me, if I was going out and drinking, I couldn't say what she would say.

Jim: Ian, my daddy's friend. I wouldn't want him to know because he goes and tells my daddy and then tells me all that he said.

Niamh: That time I was really bad in school. I took a book without asking, without telling. She wasn't in. I wouldn't want my parents to know if I did bad things because they would say why did I do that.

Bernadette: I wouldn't want any of my relatives to know because they would go and spread it around the place and carry tales.

Briege: My dad would start shouting.

Sandra: My mother and father, because if I did something wrong it is really going to hurt my father. He goes in a bit of a panic. He would hit the roof.

John: I wouldn't want my friends in the hostel to know, and even the staff ... my dad, I wouldn't want my dad to know.

.....

Interviewer: You have a special secret and you can tell one person. Who will it be?

Martina: My mummy.

Interviewer: Can we think about people outside the family?

Niamh: My special friend, Joan. (*college tutor*)

Jim: It depends what it is. Maybe my father, maybe my friends.

Sandra: My father and mother.

John: My key worker first and my parents.

Bernadette: You, Bette and Shirley, my friend. I can trust you.

**BASIC HUMAN CAPABILITIES ACCORDING TO SOCIAL
COGNITIVE THEORY**

Symbolizing

Students process visual experiences into cognitive models that then serve as guides for future actions. Through symbolizing, people also ascribe meaning, form, and duration to their past experiences.

Forethought

Students plan their actions (what I am going to do), anticipate the consequences (what am I going to get for it), and determine the level of desired performance (what is my performance goal).

Observational

Students learn by observing the performance of referent (peers or supervisors) and credible others (high performers), and the consequences they receive for their actions (what do they get for it).

Self-regulatory

Students self-control their actions by setting internal standards (aspired level of performance) and by evaluating the discrepancy between the standard and the performance (where do I stand) in order to improve it.

Self-reflective

Students reflect back on their actions (how did I do) and perceptually determine how strongly they believe they can successfully accomplish the task in the future given the context (0-100% certainty).

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